

WINGS OF
ON THE A BIRD
H.R.SASS



On the Wings of a Bird

BOOKS BY
HERBERT RAVENEL SASS
ADVENTURES IN GREEN PLACES
GRAY EAGLE
ON THE WINGS OF A BIRD
WAR DRUMS
WAY OF THE WILD



EGRET AND WOOD IBIS

ON THE
Wings of a Bird

BY HERBERT RAVENEL SASS

Illustrated by
HERMAN PALMER



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TO MY MOTHER

PREFACE

TO ONE chapter of this book the title "On the Wings of a Bird" has been given; and now, when the book has been completed and the important matter of giving it a name must be considered, I can find no better name for it than the one applied to that opening chapter.

For this book tries to carry the reader through space and time to certain enchanted places: places, that is to say, which had a potent magic in them for me, however ordinary they may appear to those who will perhaps read about them. It was a magic compounded of many elements: sunshine, blue sky, trees, leaves, and clouds; silences, fragrances, sweeps of distance; colours, shadows, numberless shapes of life; bird voices, the flight of eagles across the sky, the symmetry of deer; these and many other things, small and tremendous, tangible and intangible, some of them perceived with the senses, others dreamed of and vividly imagined.

The book, however, is not an attempt to express incommunicable things. It is (although there are other wild creatures in it also) mainly a book about birds; in soul and essence a book about the beauty of birds, their beauty as we see them alive and free in the green places where they are at home. The utmost that can be hoped for it is that it may help in some small measure to bring nearer the day when man shall cease to be a destroyer and shall become instead the friend and protector of his lesser kinsmen—the guardian and preserver of that marvellous life of earth and air over which, in the course of long ages, he has achieved almost absolute power. If it can give even the slightest aid to that good cause, its faults may be forgiven.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	vii
ON THE WINGS OF A BIRD	3
THE ENCHANTED KINGDOM	33
WILD BIRDS IN A CITY GARDE	63
ALLIGATORS	85
THE MIRACLE OF LIFE	117
THE WOOD IBIS	145
OUR NATIONAL BIRD	161
OUR OTHER NATIONAL BIRD	197
THE MAGIC OF STILL WATERS	217
SEA MONSTERS	241
A WATCHER IN THE WOODS	273
HERODIAS THE WHITE	303
THE BIRDS OF JOY	317

I

On the Wings of a Bird

On the Wings of a Bird

ALL that blue, misty morning, when the breath of autumn was already in the air, I had watched the rhythmic beat of wings and the gleam of colour in the sun; and when, about noon, I lay down to rest on the top of a little green hill with the sea on one side and wide green marshes on the other, my mind was full of the beauty of birds, and I lay for a while thinking of the birds that I had seen and rejoicing in their beauty. Then, suddenly, for no reason that I could discover or imagine, my thoughts leaped back across a space of years to another region hundreds of miles away and to a memorable thing that had happened to me there.

I was in the deep woods of the Carolina mountains, woods which were a delight in themselves but which, that day, seemed almost devoid of feathered life. Beside me a little river launched outward from a high shelf of rock and plunged

in a white, foaming cataract into a deep, densely wooded gorge. I was tired and was glad of an excuse to rest, and the beauty of this spot was not only an excuse, but an invitation. For half an hour or more I had been sitting at the head of the cataract, looking down into the gorge, my eyes about on a level with the tops of the tallest hemlocks and tulip trees springing from the ravine below me.

It was a wild and beautiful place, but all life seemed to have fled from it, and but for the white water leaping and foaming at my feet it would have been oppressive in its lifelessness. Time passed, and I saw no sign of a bird or any other living thing, while if any bird-voice called in that solitude, the drumming thunder of the cataract rendered the sound inaudible. At the foot of the waterfall there was a deep, almost circular, pool rimmed with great masses of rock and enclosed on three sides by hemlocks; and my eyes were fixed idly upon the surface of this pool when I became aware of a bird of utmost brilliancy—a bird so vivid, so unbelievably radiant and splendid, that its presence in that deserted, lifeless

place seemed for a moment almost a miracle.

The sky had been overcast when I had taken my seat at the head of the cataract; but now the clouds had disappeared, and the bright sunlight, pouring down into the gorge, had transformed the pool below me. It was no longer of a dull steel-gray, but had become a deep blue, darker and richer than the blue of the sea, yet translucent and sparkling where the light breeze ruffled its surface. A young hemlock springing from the gorge thrust its slender top directly between the pool and the spot where I was sitting above the cataract; and it was on the tip of this green, slightly swaying spray of hemlock that the bird of unbelievable radiance had appeared—a male scarlet tanager.

Looking down at him from above in the full flood of the sunlight, seeing him against the background of the dark blue translucent pool, silvered by the breeze and framed in the dark, lustrous foliage of the surrounding hemlocks, I said to myself that no man had ever seen a sight more beautiful. His brilliant scarlet back and breast glowed like living flame; his black wings and tail

seemed not merely black, but glittered with blue or purple iridescent tints—an effect that must have been due to the metallic sheen of the blue water against which I saw him. Indeed, I knew in an instant that much of the beauty of the picture was due to the setting; to the great, lonely, densely wooded mountains towering above the gorge where the white cataract foamed and roared; to the dark blue pool which was the background for the flame-like bird; to the delicate filigree of dark, shining hemlock foliage which on all sides encompassed him so that the bird himself and the pool behind and below him were framed in that feather-like tracery.

I knew also that now, for the first time in my life, I really saw the scarlet tanager—that the two wanderers of that species that I had seen in past years in my own lowland country, where the scarlet tanager is so rare as to be almost unknown, had given me scarcely a hint of the splendour of the bird amid its native surroundings. I had thought them beautiful, yet they had left me with a vague sense of disappointment. Something was lacking, something that I could

not fix or define, and the image made in my mind was not an enduring image. Hence I remember them only dimly, as handsome red and black birds seen amid elm foliage and viewed from below against the background of a pale blue sky. But in this tanager of the cataract, with the dark, interlacing hemlock boughs around him, and the dark blue pool behind him, and the steep, forested, sombre mountains looming above him on either side, and the surging thunder of the waterfall shaking the air, there was a splendid, blazing beauty that burned its image on the mind and made an undying picture.

I sat on my little green hill—which was really a sand dune covered with grasses and low shrubs—between the marshes and the sea, and wondered 'why my thoughts had taken that strange, swift leap across the years to the tanager of the cataract. Thoughts have a queer way of launching themselves on prodigious journeys across time and space; but generally there is a reason for these sudden excursions—some sight, odour, or sound which in an instant brings old memories

to life and transports us, as if by magic, to days long past and places far away.

Just behind my knoll lay the ocean beach, and my ears were full of the music of the surf. But the ocean that day was almost as smooth as glass; the sound of the surf was low and soothing and gently melancholy, and it could not have recalled to me the loud, wild, drumming thunder of that plunging cataract where the tanager adventure had befallen. Nor could there have been anything in the salt smell of the sea and the marsh to recall the faint, elusive odours of those mountain woods and thus recreate the tanager adventure. No, I decided, it was not sound or smell which had touched a chord of memory and sent me on that journey: it must have been something perceived with the eye, but what it was remained for a time a mystery.

Presently, far away across the plain of marsh below and in front of me, I saw a green heron flying in desperate haste straight toward the knoll where I sat, and just above the heron I distinguished a darting, swerving speck that was evidently some much smaller bird. As I watched,

the smaller bird swooped and seemed for a space to perch on the heron's back, while the heron on his part dipped low to the marsh and swerved to right and left, his neck outstretched and his wings beating frantically as he tried to shake off his pursuer.

On and on they came in headlong flight, and soon I saw that the heron's assailant was not a kingbird, as I had supposed, but a female red-winged blackbird. Apparently the heron had intended to seek refuge in the shrubbery just below the knoll where I was sitting; but either because the chase became too hot, or because he saw me sitting there, he did not come on to the knoll, but dropped into the high marsh perhaps thirty yards in front of me. There he was safe amid the tall, close-growing marsh blades; and the blackbird, abandoning her victim, flew on and perched in a low bush a little to my right. She had been sitting there only a few seconds when a male redwing joined her.

In that instant my problem was solved. In that instant I knew why my memory had made that swift, mysterious journey to the mountain woods

and to that day when I saw the scarlet tanager of the cataract. On the shoulders of the male blackbird I found the answer to the riddle. As he perched in front of me in the bright sun, the scarlet of his shoulders was the scarlet of the scarlet tanager—the same resplendent, flaming hue which seemed more brilliant, more effulgent, than any mere pigment and which had in it the living quality of fire; and here again I saw it against a dark background—the black body of the bird himself. I remembered then that, after I had lain down on the summit of the knoll, a male blackbird, probably this same individual, had taken flight from a bush on the slope of the hillock and that for an instant my eye had caught the gleam of his epaulettes in the sun. It must have been that momentary flash of colour which in the twinkling of an eye brought the past to life again and swept me backward through months and years to live once more that adventure of long ago.

Every man who loves birds—unless he is one of those exceedingly dry and learned scientists who do not really love birds at all but only

the science of birds—has had experiences like this one. Indeed, they are familiar incidents of the bird-lover's life, and they add immeasurably to his joy in birds and in life itself. Not long ago a strange thing happened, a thing which, so far as I know, has never been recorded by any naturalist. In a small Japanese privet tree below my window a pair of cardinals built a nest, this past April, about ten feet above the ground. There the female laid three bluish-white eggs speckled and spotted with gray and reddish brown; and there, while her handsome mate sang jubilant songs in a tall pecan tree overhead, she brought into the world three tiny nestlings.

For a while all went well. The male cardinal was even more industrious than his wife in providing the nestlings with grubs and larvæ, and the little ones grew rapidly and waxed more and more vociferous so that their shrill voices, clamouring for food, could be heard at a considerable distance. It was this, I think, that brought disaster upon them—this rash advertisement of their presence in a world of dangerous enemies. Fate took the form of an ebon bird with strange,

glaring, malevolent white eyes; a grackle of that completely villainous race that the scientists have named *Aglæus*. This sable-plumaged, pale-eyed ogre heard the baby voices calling, and when the parent cardinals returned to the nest they found no babies there.

This was in early May, and for weeks thereafter the deserted nest remained as it was when the bereaved cardinals left it. I passed within six feet of it a dozen times each day; from the window of my study I could look down upon it and into it at a distance of not more than fifteen feet. It was no longer of any interest to me, however, being merely a melancholy reminder of what might have been, and I glanced at it only casually with an eye that saw not, because it expected to see nothing. So, through May and most of June, the nest remained neglected and almost forgotten, and I had no hint of the strange thing that was coming to pass.

Then, on the morning of the twenty-fourth of June, I was told that a small, greenish bird had been seen to enter the deserted nest. I had seen some parula warblers about the place, and I

supposed that one of them had perched on the nest for a moment in its search for food: but my small daughter insisted with all the dignity of her three and a half years that the little greenish bird was still in the nest and was making her home in it. As an easy way of proving that this was not true, I grasped the slim stem of the tree and shook it; whereupon I discovered that three and a half years are not too few for wisdom. With my own eyes I saw a female painted bunting or nonpareil fly out of the nest and vanish in the shrubbery.

I needed no further urging. I fairly raced for the stepladder. Yet before I got it into place I realized the folly of what I had been thinking. It was incredible that this nonpareil was really using the cardinals' deserted nest, for the nonpareil, like nearly all other birds, builds its own home. As I climbed the ladder I was more than a little ashamed of my excitement and was prepared for the inevitable anticlimax. Of course, I said to myself, this nonpareil had simply been resting in the deserted cardinals' nest for a while, perhaps taking a little nap there. I paused on one

of the middle rungs of the ladder and cautiously pulled toward me the branch containing the nest, sure now that I would find it empty. There, at the bottom of the nest, I saw three tiny, nearly naked nonpareil nestlings.

I stood for several minutes on the rung of the ladder, staring at the baby nonpareils in that cardinal nest, vaguely aware that I had found something new in bird life, something not of colossal importance, perhaps, but never before recorded, so far as I was aware, in all the annals of natural history. But I was not really on that ladder or anywhere near it. The part of me that could think and feel and dream was three hundred miles from the privet tree under my study window; and, though my physical eyes were still fixed upon the nonpareil nestlings in the cavity of the nest, the eyes of my mind were looking upon another and very different scene. In thought and in spirit I was on a high mountain ridge above the clouds, and around me the deep woods rang with the flute-like songs of wood thrushes, and at my feet, embedded in a steep mossy bank, was the nest of a junco or snowbird,

one of the loveliest nests that I had ever seen.

It was very vivid and real, that green wooded spot on a lofty mountain to which my memory had flown in an instant as though borne through space on the wings of some incredibly swift bird. I could hear again the flutings of the mountain thrushes, the sweetest music to be heard in the high woods; and I could hear, too, the loud, ringing songs of ovenbirds on the slope below me, and the lively, lyrical converse of blue-headed vireos. There was another song also, one that interested me intensely because I did not know it and could not identify the singer, a tiny bird of the warbler family that kept always to the tops of the tallest trees. Even more vividly than these bird-sounds the scene itself was reproduced: the mossy bank where the junco nest was hidden, the overarching white oaks, the chestnut trees in bloom, the pink, crimson-spotted chalices of the kalmia or mountain ivy: and most vividly of all I saw a certain young locust tree, to the slender, perpendicular trunk of which two great pileated woodpeckers or logcocks were clinging, one on each side of the

slim, straight bole, and directly opposite each other, their long, rakish, scarlet crests gleaming in the sun.

Almost under the locust tree stood a small wild cherry bush loaded with fruit, and in it and under it there was a constant stirring of furred and feathered life. In the bush were catbirds, robins, towhee buntings, and one or two wood thrushes, while below it a pair of brown thrashers walked about seeking the fallen fruit, and a striped chipmunk darted here and there, picking up the cherry stones dropped by the birds, turning them deftly in his mouth to clean them, and then stuffing them into his cheek-pouches. There were hairy and downy woodpeckers, too, in the trees near by, and one slim, sulphur-bellied crested flycatcher, while in the low shrubbery I saw from time to time handsome black-throated blue warblers which were evidently breeding close at hand. But the most beautiful and to me by far the most interesting bird seen in that place of many birds was a splendid male rose-breasted grosbeak.

Some distance down the steep slope a tall

chestnut tree thrust its tapering summit above the other trees clothing the mountain side, and on one of the highest twigs of this chestnut the grosbeak perched, bathed in sunlight, exactly on a level with my eyes. He did not sing, though I should have given much to hear his song, and he came no nearer to me. But my strong field-glasses revealed every detail of his upper plumage; and suddenly, while I watched, he turned a little on his gently swaying perch so that the triangular rose-red shield on his snow-white breast, invisible until that moment, burst suddenly upon my vision. This was the climax of that morning, the rarest and the loveliest thing seen that day, or in many days; and of all the sights seen in that favoured spot the rose-red shield on that snow-white breast, brilliantly illumined by the sun, shines brightest in my memory.

These things—these sights and sounds seen and heard one morning years ago in a green, secluded place on a high mountain ridge—came back to me with wonderful distinctness as I stood on my stepladder gazing down into the cardinal

nest, which was the most extraordinary nest that I had ever seen because it contained not baby cardinals but baby nonpareils. In a moment of discovery, a moment when I had just happened upon something new and strange in natural history, I was transported far from the scene of that discovery, so that for a brief interval it was forgotten as completely as though it were of no interest to me at all. Yet, puzzling as that flight of memory may appear, the explanation was simple and plain.

It was in the nest before me. The nest as the cardinals had built it had too large an opening to suit the much smaller nonpareils. They had made the opening smaller and had given it a more compactly constructed rim; and they had also deepened the depression or cup and had put into it a beautifully woven lining of long, fine fibres. It was this lining, so much more skilfully contrived than the rather loose lining of the typical cardinal home, that caught my eye instantly as I looked into the nest; and it was this lining that touched a chord of memory and sent

my thoughts flying, as though on the wings of a bird, to that spot on a distant mountain where I had found a junco nest one June morning.

That junco nest, too—placed not in a tree but in the side of a steep bank under a rhododendron thicket—had been beautifully lined with long, fine fibres intricately woven—an exquisite piece of handiwork; and the moment my eye lit upon the lining that the nonpareils had placed in the cardinal nest, there flashed into my mind a picture of the junco nest in the mossy bank under the rhododendrons, and I was back again on that mountain ridge with the wood thrushes, the logcocks, the rose-breasted grosbeak, and the other birds that I had seen there.

The dry-as-dust scientist may term this, scornfully and with some semblance of truth, a “mind-wandering” chapter. But in this kind of mind-wandering, in these swift, involuntary flights of memory to other scenes and other days, lies part—and a great part—of the bird-lover’s happiness. And not the bird-lover only. To every man and woman who is alive to the beauty and wonder

of the green world there will come, from time to time, pictures out of the past, and nearly always they will be beautiful pictures, since memory loves beauty and hates ugliness. Thus there is conferred upon beauty a certain immortality. It does not always droop and fade and pass away as utterly as though it had never been. Often its image remains, printed upon some human mind, to live as long as that man or woman lives: and sometimes that man or woman is a poet, a singer of imperishable songs, and in those songs that image of beauty is preserved, to endure while the race of man endures.

Many learned books have been written about loons, grebes, herons, and other waterfowl; their feathers and their bones have been measured, and all their anatomical characters have been studied and are catalogued in elaborate treatises. But all these laborious books, admirable as they are, will be forgotten before that most lustrous verse of Bryant's noble poem; that verse which expresses all the beauty, all the strangeness and wildness and vastness of a marshland sunset with a lone waterfowl winging across the evening sky:

Whither, 'midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
Far through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way?

How vividly we see that picture, and how beautiful it is—beautiful with a strange, melancholy beauty which, for all its melancholy, exalts and exhilarates: the rosy colours of the dying day; the illimitable sweep of the darkening marshlands over the face of which the night is stealing; and, far off, darkly limned against the glowing sky, a long-winged water bird flying on and on, “lone wandering, but not lost.”

To us who are not poets there cannot come the glory and the ineffable delight of preserving for generations yet unborn the beautiful sights of the woods. We can only be thankful that memory preserves them for us in our own minds, so that some of them, at any rate, will remain with us through many years and perhaps will never be forgotten while life lasts. And sometimes it is not memory that we must thank for some glowing mind picture. No observer need be ashamed if, at times, he sees in some bird or beast or

flower more than the physical eye shows him, for the physical eye cannot always show him all that there is to see.

Up from the tropics in April and May the curlew armies come in long, weaving lines like wisps of smoke, or in wide, crescent-shaped regiments driving swiftly through the air. For weeks the marshes are alive with them, with the stir of their wings and the wild music of their voices; and it is a delight to roam the salt flats then, when the winding creeks are abrim with the high spring tides, and watch the play of the afternoon sunlight on the plumage of the curlew flocks feeding or standing at gaze in the short grass of the lonely seaside meadows within sight and sound of the surf.

At such times, due perhaps to some effect of the slanting sun rays, the birds appear very large, much larger than they really are; and their long necks and legs and long, curved bills, as they stand motionless and erect, perhaps fifty or a hundred of them together, lend a fantastic touch to the picture which enhances its wild beauty. But the crowning beauty of that picture of still

life is the beauty of colour that is in it. By some mysterious alchemy of the late light, some subtle magic of the declining sun, the curlews are miraculously transformed. One sees them no longer as dull dun or grayish birds, monotonously similar. Instead, their bodies glow with innumerable warm, rich tones, subdued but marvellously beautiful, ranging all the way from golden-buff to dark velvet-brown, changing and deepening as the sun sinks lower.

And if it is a delight to see them thus standing at gaze, it is an even keener delight to watch them as they take wing and rise from the marsh in widespread ranks, sweeping low above the tips of the marsh grass. When the flock is in motion, the magic of the late sunlight is increased in power, and the rich colour-tones of the beating wings and the moving bodies of the birds become even more varied and more lustrous. Yet now, when this beauty of colour is at its height, you may be least aware of it; for there is something else in the picture now that even more potently fascinates the eye and the mind—a beauty of movement wholly indescribable.

It is not that the flight of each bird is notably graceful. Rather it is an effect produced by the flight of the whole flock rising together and flying straight away in wide, close ranks just above the surface of the marsh. If the birds rise high, this effect is lost; but often the flock flies low, at about the height of the observer's eyes, so that he sees plainly the up-and-down beat of the wings, their upper as well as their under surfaces. Sweeping onward side by side, in a crescent-shaped phalanx perhaps fifty yards in extent from flank to flank, the wing-tips of each bird almost touch those of the birds to right and left of it; and as those hundreds of long, curved pinions rise and fall and rise and fall again and again and again, there is produced a shimmering effect of waviness, and the whole upper surface of the flock undulates with a rippling motion as of water ruffled by the wind. Yet this is more beautiful by far than any wind-ruffled water, because there is life in it and a wealth of warm colour never to be found in any sea or lake, and because of a strange, faint, golden mistiness that sometimes invests and glorifies those shimmering wings.

So much the physical eye may see. There is more than this to be seen when the returning curlew flocks come down in fall from the Far North. They bring with them a vision of the distant country from which they have come. Only a few short weeks ago they were there, these very birds, on the shores of the Polar Sea, three thousand miles away—thousands and thousands of them, wheeling in clouds above the Arctic wastes, preparing for the journey that they must soon make along half the length of the world. In those flocks were many birds that had made that journey again and again; yet there were many others whose wings had never met that stupendous test—young birds of the year that had broken the shell not long before and were still novices in the art of flying. But winter was coming, the pitiless winter of the ice-armoured North, and young and old, they must flee before it.

So the long flight began, and the air lanes southward from the Polar Ocean were thronged with the curlew armies. What sights they saw as they journeyed: the unknown northern lands and the empty seas where no sails moved; the

long, black, desolate capes and rocky promontories; the level barrens and the interminable tundras; the glittering, gem-like lakes; great herds of caribou, perhaps, as numberless as the bison herds of a century ago, moving slowly across the plain, and moose and wolves and wolverines and other quadrupeds of those unpeopled fastnesses. And above and below them as they sped onward moved other feathered wayfarers, sometimes in small companies, sometimes in hosts of thousands—geese, swans, wild ducks of many kinds, phalaropes, plovers black-breasted and golden, and legions of sandpipers and long-billed avocets.

All these the curlew flocks bring with them when they come to my marshes, so that I, too, may see them all; not in the flesh, not with the physical eye which can see so little of the wonders that the world affords, but with the eye of the mind. And this is not all. For when the curlews come to my marshes, they have completed only about half their journey; and when they take flight again and vanish to the southward, I can fly with them in fancy down the long leagues of

surf-lined coast, across miles of tropical seas, and along the palm-fringed South American shores to British Guiana and the Amazonian wilderness.

To fly, as though on the wings of a bird, to the beautiful scenes of the past which memory, that lover of beauty, keeps vivid and green; to fly, as though on the wings of a bird, to distant regions of the earth which the feathered voyagers know well but which we can see only in dreams—this is the privilege of him who loves birds for their own sake, for their wildness, their freedom, and their beauty. It is only in certain moods that we may make these journeys, but these are moods to be welcomed and prayerfully invoked. As for him to whom such moments never come:

The soft blue sky did never melt
Into his heart; he never felt
The witchery of the soft blue sky.

But there are not many of that type in the growing ranks of those to whom birds and all wild things are objects of perennial interest. Far more numerous are they whose interest in the wild creatures springs from a sense of nature's

beauty and wonder; a vague, dim sense, perhaps, but real, nevertheless, and destined, it may be, to flourish and blossom.

There are dull days and dark skies, and man has spread the blight of ugliness upon many places that once were lovely to the eye. Just now a cult of dreariness has risen among us, under the name of realism, and no book is held to be true unless it paints life in drab colours. Yet I can shut my eyes and see the flaming tanager of the cataract. I can gaze three hundred miles into space and see the rose-red shield on a mountain grosbeak's soft white breast. I can sit here in my study and see the wavy wings of the curlew flocks shimmering above the marshes of Edisto. And I know that next spring, when the first orchard oriole comes, he will fly to the slim young elm, which a wistaria vine has climbed even to its summit, and perch upon a superb, drooping wistaria bloom and search among the dewy petals for something hidden there that the orioles love. And I need not wait for the spring. Closing my eyes, I can see the oriole now as I have seen him in the past—the rich russet and

glossy black of his plumage, the lilac and purple loveliness of the long, pendent flower to which he clings, the fresh green of the young elm leaves around him, the blue April sky above.

That is why the lover of birds, who loves them for what they are, will never be deceived by the cult of dreariness. That is why we know that beauty is not a myth and that the realists, as they call themselves, are merely people who have fitted their eyes with dark spectacles. We know that of all mortal things beauty is the most real and the most enduring. For the drab things fade and are forgotten: but when once we have looked upon beauty with a seeing eye, we can go back long afterward, across decades of time and leagues of space, to the very spot where we found it, and see it again, fadeless and wonderful as ever.

II

The Enchanted Kingdom

The Enchanted Kingdom

I HAD been walking for a long while through a pine forest, and the two things that are most desirable in a pine forest had kept me company—sunlight and wind. It was not a strong wind but a breeze just vigorous enough to sway the tall, slender trees gently and awaken their soft mystical voices, so that all day long they were singing their low, crooning, unearthly song.

There were no flowers as yet and no bird notes were to be heard, but I did not miss them or regret their absence. Only the softer rays of the sun filtered down through the high green roof overhead to spread a misty, translucent beauty over the temple-like interior of the woods. In the straight, tall trunks of the pines were purple, lilac, and lavender hues so delicately lovely that a bright flower or bird in that dim, exquisitely tinted setting would have been incongruous and perhaps displeasing to the eye; while any loud

bird song, no matter how clear-toned or melodious, striking across the low, continuous harmony of the pines, must have seemed an alien and discordant voice.

So, to me, on this afternoon, the lifelessness of the forest—or, rather, its seeming lifelessness—was not a thing to be lamented. This was no place or hour for those small shapes and voices of the feathered world that dart restlessly from twig to twig about their small affairs and fill the air with lively converse about inconsequential matters. Here one had a sense of the life beyond the life that we know, that mysterious power or presence which is behind all visible nature and of which we are aware only in rare moments when the mystery of nature seems to pervade and possess the spirit. It was chiefly the low, unceasing music of the pine forest that inspired this mood—music that came from everywhere and from nowhere, as though it had no earthly origin but sprang from disembodied, elusive beings, floating invisible through the long, misty corridors of the woods.

I passed slowly down those dim, colonnaded

aisles. The thick carpet of pinestraw hushed the sound of my footfalls, and I moved carefully so that no twig snapped under my feet, for, as always at such times, it seemed to me that any sharp, sudden noise would be almost a disaster. Yet, though the spell of the forest was strong, my senses were keenly alert. Again and again, like a finger tapping on a window pane, a thought kept knocking at the back door of my mind—the thought that invisible eyes were watching, that unseen ears were listening.

It was a familiar feeling, yet one to which I had never grown accustomed, this sense of surveillance, this feeling that I was being watched; and in that secluded place, where no voice of any living thing was to be heard but only the solemn, unearthly harmony of the pines, it thrilled me strangely. Empty as those woods appeared to be, they were the home of an abundant wild life, the haunt of deer, wild turkeys, bay lynxes or wildcats and gray foxes. Here and there under the trees were low, dense thickets of bushes and vines—myrtle, gallberry, bay, smilax, jessamine, and other small evergreen growths. I had passed

many of these coverts, sometimes skirting their edges closely, but I knew that it would be useless to enter them because, long before I could penetrate their outer defenses, any wild creature lurking there would make its escape on the other side of the thicket. Nevertheless, as that feeling that I was being watched took firmer hold upon me, I scanned with a more intense interest the thickets which I passed; and at last, yielding to a strong, insistent prompting, I turned sharply to the left and made my way with redoubled caution toward a clump of myrtle bushes at the edge of a small, gently sloping opening in the pine wood.

It was not a promising place for an adventure. The clump of myrtles was too small to be a suitable covert for a deer or a lynx, and just behind it the woods fell away, forming a sunny glade smoothly carpeted with pinestraw and surrounded by the tall, straight boles of the pines. In fact, as I approached the spot, I realized that my hope of surprising one of the larger and shyer woods-dwellers was doomed to disappointment. Yet something told me to go on and to move slowly and noiselessly; and somehow the sense of

expectancy, of impending adventure, grew not weaker but stronger as I stole along the edge of the myrtles, moving toward the end of the thicket so that I could look past it into the little glade beyond.

Then suddenly, from that vague, lingering hope of something big and dramatic like a noble whitetail stag or a fierce amber-eyed lynx, I descended to very small things; and yet the sight that I saw was so beautiful and so unexpected that I would not have exchanged it for the most impressive spectacle which those wild and lonely woods might have afforded.

In the centre of the sunlit glade, walking quickly about over the smooth carpet of pine-straw, were two tiny beings which in that first instant of delighted surprise seemed more like fairies than like birds. Indeed, for a brief interval they *were* fairies to me—as exquisite and mysterious as those imaginary denizens of the wildwood that exist only as long as childhood lasts and then die and fade to ashes like so many other lovely and illusive things that only children know. For me, in that moment, the fairies of

childhood had come to life again; for not only were these two little inhabitants of the pinewood glade as small and delicate as fairies; there was actually in them some quality of inner loveliness having nothing to do with flesh and blood, some sweet loveliness of the spirit shining through them and spreading round them an aura of gentleness and goodness.

They were ground doves, or sparrow doves, to translate the Latin name that the naturalists have given them. They resembled the common or mourning dove in form, though their tails were proportionately shorter. But they were little larger than sparrows, being only about six and a half inches long; and, in spite of their shorter tails, they were far more beautiful than the common dove, having something of the beauty of delicately tinted sea shells or flower petals—a luminous, exquisite loveliness of colour and tone, soft silvery gray and iridescent shell pink, rare in the bird world. Seen in that circle of brilliant light, with the misty, lilac-tinted dimness of the temple-like pinewood all round them, the delicate

beauty of their colouring entranced and captivated the eye; but even more striking was that quality of inner loveliness, as I have called it, that impression of mildness and gentleness which nearly all the members of the dove family impart but which is more characteristic of the ground dove than of any other species.

They were birds little known to me at that time and I watched them with an intense delight in their ethereal colouring, their quick, pretty movements, and most of all the gentleness and sweetness that seemed to radiate from them. Some years before a great blizzard had thinned the numbers of the ground doves in all that region so that the bird had become rare. I had seen it on only a few occasions; and seeing it now for the first time under favourable conditions and in a suitable setting, the experience was a revelation of the discoveries that I had yet to make in the world of birds and of the pleasure that those discoveries might bring.

Perhaps it was the mood that had possessed me all that day or perhaps it was an effect of the

peculiarly fairy-like aspect and personality of those two tiny feathered beings moving about with quick, light steps in the sunny glade before me. At any rate, as I stood watching them, a thought came back into my mind again, a thought or fantasy dormant for weeks because for a long time nothing had occurred to awaken it: the thought that behind the world of the woods which I already knew there was another world of the woods, an enchanted world, real and yet almost mythical, inhabited by rare, beautiful living things unknown or almost unknown to me and all the more beautiful and desirable because of the glamour of mystery that surrounded them.

I have called this thought or idea a "fantasy," but that is not quite the proper word. For all lovers of the woods this enchanted world must exist; and always when we walk in the woods or in other wild, solitary places we are hoping, unconsciously perhaps, for a glimpse beyond its magic portals. For me its enchantment lies mainly in the living things that inhabit it, especially the birds—birds which, because of their



GROUND DOVES



ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK

exceeding beauty or because of their strangeness or rarity, are possessed of a peculiar lure and fascination.

I remember, as though it had happened only yesterday, my first glimpse of this enchanted kingdom. In early boyhood birds meant little to me. I knew them only as the hunter knows the game that he hunts, and I was interested only in the larger kinds worth going after with sling-shot or air gun, or in the species that gathered in great flocks, like the cedar waxwings in winter, and afforded especially easy targets as they swarmed, perhaps several hundred in one flock, in the leafless trees. One spring day, in the course of one of my bird-hunting expeditions, I saw a bird in a dense magnolia tree. Perhaps in the dark shadows of the magnolia's evergreen foliage the bird appeared somewhat larger than it actually was. At any rate, it seemed large enough to be worthy of a place in my gamebag—I had no gamebag, as a matter of fact, but stuffed my luckless victims into my pockets—and I took aim and brought the bird down.

A few moments later I was holding in my hand

a bird more beautiful than any bird that I had ever seen before, a bird of such gorgeous colouring that I could scarcely believe the evidence of my eyes. Its head and neck were of a rich indigo blue; its back was bright golden green shimmering and glinting like metal in the sun; its breast and entire underparts were of an intense vermilion red. So brilliant were these colours and so sharply contrasted that the bird appeared to be painted—as though some skilful artist had spread upon its plumage the richest and most vivid pigments at his command; and yet there was nothing artificial in the effect produced but, on the contrary, a perfection of lustrous and resplendent loveliness as natural as the loveliness of a flower.

My prize was a male nonpareil or painted bunting, a first cousin of the familiar indigo bunting which breeds throughout most of the eastern United States; but as I stood there holding it in my hand and gazing at it in incredulous amazement, I did not know what it was and could scarcely bring myself to realize that a bird of such tropical magnificence inhabited my own

countryside. I had undoubtedly seen hundreds of nonpareils, for the species is abundant in the region where I live; but because these birds are small, considerably smaller than English sparrows, for instance, they had never interested me and I had never bothered to look twice at those that I saw on my bird-hunting trips. Hence, for all practical purposes, the nonpareil that I shot that day in the big magnolia was the first that I had ever beheld in my life; and when I had picked it up and looked at it lying there in my hand, its astounding exotic beauty burst upon me as an utterly new experience and I had my first glimpse of that enchanted kingdom of the woods which lies behind and beyond the familiar woodland world of everyday acquaintance.

It is, in sober truth, an enchanted kingdom; and although its confines may change as one's knowledge grows, it will always be there to beckon and lure us on. It is the dream-world of the woods, but it is a dream-world where many dreams come true. It is the fairyland of the woods lover's dearest imaginings, but it is a fairyland where the fairies are living, breathing beings,

to be seen and known some day if only we will search for them long enough with eyes that can really see.

That poor murdered nonpareil revealed to me, even as a boy, the presence of this enchanted realm at my very door. It opened my eyes to the fact that in my own woods and fields were beautiful beings whose existence I had never imagined, and it awakened in me a new interest in birds and all wild creatures so that I began to regard them as something more than game to be hunted and killed. Many of the more common birds and mammals I already knew, but now I began to discover to my astonishment and joy how many there were that I did not know at all.

I read about them in books and I studied with a wholly indescribable delight the beautiful coloured plates of Alexander Wilson and of Audubon. Thus their names and appearance became familiar to me, and I found some of them on my trips into the country and soon came to know them fairly well. But there were others which for months or even for years I could not find, and these assumed the character of legen-

dary beings, doubly fascinating because of their mystery—beings so rare and so elusive that often I thought of them as mythical rather than real and scarcely dared hope that some day I might see them.

These were—and some of them still are—the inhabitants of my enchanted kingdom of the woods. Around them in my mind that enchanted kingdom took form; they made it and gave it glamour and beauty—the vivid colours of their shimmering wings, the wildness of their wild hearts, the mystery of their own mysterious elusiveness. I learned, as time went on, that many of them were not rare, after all, that I could find them easily and frequently if I looked in the right places. Yet somehow the glamour of those early days still clung to them, so that, even after I had seen them many times, they kept their place in my thoughts as inhabitants of my enchanted kingdom and retained, some of them to this day, that mystical charm which invested them in boyhood.

This is true of the ground dove, that diminutive and fairy-like cousin of the common dove; it

is true of the nonpareil, the indigo bunting's resplendent kinsman, the most gorgeously coloured and certainly one of the most beautiful of all American birds; and it is true of many others which in those days were legendary beings but which I now know to be creatures of flesh and blood. In nearly every group or family of birds there are one or two species rarer than the others. Often these rarer kinds are the most beautiful and interesting members of the group, and it was only natural that among these many of the inhabitants of my enchanted kingdom were included.

Thus in the family of the herons, one of the most interesting of all bird families, the yellow-crowned night heron had, and still has, a place apart, for I knew all the other species well before I saw my first yellow-crown; and among the shore birds the tall, handsome oystercatcher, with its long, knife-like, bright red bill, remained for years a creature of myth and fancy, to be read about in books but never to be seen in the flesh. Even more unreal and therefore more alluring was that fantastic denizen of the deep swamps, the snakebird or anhinga. I must have

spent hours all told gloating over pictures of that strange fowl which seems to combine the characters of the wild turkey, the cormorant, and the water snake and which recalls more vividly than any other living creature the grotesque reptile-like birds of prehistoric days.

I remember, too, how I pored over pictures of the turnstone—pictures showing a beautifully variegated bird, red-buff and black and pure white; and these pictures filled me not only with longing to behold so handsome a creature but also with a vague disquiet because I saw occasionally birds which I took to be turnstones but which were far less striking than the turnstones pictured in the books. Then one memorable afternoon in May, beside a wide blue river, when the sun was just sinking behind the hazy woods on the other shore, I saw four birds standing on a shelly bank at the water's edge in company with many small sandpipers and plovers. My heart gave a leap, for I recognized them at once—they were the beautiful variegated turnstones of the books, the turnstones that the bird painters had painted.

The puzzle was soon solved. The other turnstones that I had seen were all of them in winter plumage. These four were decked in the lovely nuptial plumage of spring, rich rufous and snowy white and glossy black; and as they stood motionless among the white shells at the edge of the bright blue water, their colours shining in the late light and the sunset sky behind them aglow with rose-pink and burnished gold, I offered my apologies to the bird painters whom I had accused in my thoughts of making the turnstone a more beautiful creature than it really was.

All these are still dwellers in my enchanted kingdom, birds around which a glamour of mystery was thrown long ago, a charm that has survived the fuller knowledge of later years. And there are many others, so many that I could not name all of them here.

The rose-breasted grosbeak is one of them and others are the Baltimore oriole, the red-cockaded woodpecker, the red-breasted nuthatch, the gray kingbird, the crossbill, the blue grosbeak, the scarlet tanager, the whistling swan, the raven,

the bald eagle, the roseate spoonbill, the sandhill crane, the black-necked stilt, the marbled god-wit, the avocet with its long up-curved bill, the stately wild turkey, the graceful swallow-tailed kite, the gyrfalcons, both white and black, and the great rough-legged hawk. Some of these, though common in other parts of the country, are rare or unknown in my own region; others are fairly familiar to me now but still keep the charm that was theirs when I knew them only as fascinating names.

Nearly all those little fairies of the bird world, which are known to naturalists as wood warblers and more than fifty species of which are found in the United States, held for me in those early days a magical allurements. They were, with few exceptions, birds utterly unknown to me then, and their very names thrilled me strangely, while the colour-plates of wood warblers in certain books filled me with an almost passionate delight.

It was amazing to me to realize that in my own woods these bright-hued, exquisite beings might be found. Rather they seemed to belong to some half-fabulous region of the tropics where, in

the heat of never-ending summer, fecund Nature runs riot in voluptuous loveliness. More than any other group of birds the wood warblers made my enchanted kingdom of the woods a realm of beauty as well as mystery—a country where I could find, in numberless graceful shapes of life, colours as radiant as the colours of the rainbow, patterns as delicate as those of the most delicate flowers.

Day after day I went seeking them and one by one I found them: parula warbler and black-throated blue warbler, hooded warbler and yellow-throat, redstart and black-poll, black-throated green and ovenbird, pine warbler and palm warbler—tiny dwellers in the tree-tops or in the shadowy secret places of the woods, bright, joyous, fairy-like beings, quick and buoyant and everlastingly happy, living their little lives as we might long to live ours, careless of the future and the past; and there are others that I have not yet found and perhaps shall never find, and these, too, are denizens of that enchanted kingdom which lies somewhere behind and beyond the woods and fields that I know and yet

includes within its hazy boundaries those same familiar woods and fields and even the grass plot below my study window.

For you cannot trace upon any map the frontiers of your enchanted kingdom. It is remote and yet near at hand; you were far from it five seconds ago—oh, ten thousand miles away—yet now, in the twinkling of an eye, you are in its very heart. One day in early June I was paddling with two companions on a secluded lagoon hidden deep in the woods. On either side the smooth trunks of cypresses towered upward from the still, dark water, and overhead was a roof of cypress foliage almost shutting out the sun. Except the water lane that we were following, the whole lagoon was densely forested with cypresses, the trees standing so close together in the water that even our little punt could not have found another passage amongst them; and somehow that day (although I had always loved the cypress lagoons) the dimness and silence of that shadowed, moss-curtained place, where no bird moved and no bird voice was heard, began to oppress me and weigh upon my spirits so that

I longed to be back again in the more open, sunlit woodlands through which we had passed on our way to the lagoon.

We paddled on along the narrow water lane while my feeling of oppression grew, hearing no sound of any live thing and seeing no sign of life; and suddenly in the very heart of that watery wilderness of trees we came out into a small, sunny, open lake, beautiful beyond description—a lake which was an almost unbelievable paradise of birds.

I had visited the spot before and I should have been prepared for that moment. Yet in an instant I was in another world, a dream-world of the woods where I had wandered often as a boy; and I was in one of the richest and most wonderful provinces of that dream-world, a province peopled by marvellous beings which were among the most alluring inhabitants of my enchanted kingdom.

As our punt emerged from the water lane into the open lake I saw them—scores of white ibises, their bodies shining like snow against the green background of the feathery-foliaged cypresses

fringing the lake; and in another moment all the air above the tree-tops was alive with the big white birds as the whole host of them took wing, alarmed at our approach. Back and forth they swept in strong, swift flight above us, and with them many herons of several kinds, Louisiana herons, little blues, black-crowned night herons, and great egrets, while far above this aërial whirlpool of feathered life a long-necked anhinga circled serenely in the still air, and four great wood ibises, larger and statelier birds in flight than the white ibises whose sanctuary we had invaded, sailed slowly across the pale blue sky.

Now all this was not a new spectacle to me. I had visited upon other occasions this white ibis rookery, which had been discovered some years before by my friend Arthur T. Wayne, a veteran naturalist, and I had spent many hours in heron rookeries where the birds were even more numerous. But never before, in this spot or in others like it, had I been more sharply aware of that old enchantment which was not wholly a product of the spectacle before me but had its real origin far back in those earlier days when I had dreamed

of just such a sight as this and yet had never dared hope to see so marvellous a thing.

This that I was now witnessing had been part of my enchanted kingdom, my dream-world of the woods. In fancy I had seen it many times before, years and years earlier, when I knew the white ibis only as a strange and beautiful colour plate in a book—a snow-white bird, somewhat heron-like in form, with long red legs and an amazingly long, curved bill of a brilliant carmine or orange-red hue. Long after I had become familiar with that other tall, fantastic denizen of the swamps, the wood ibis (which is not really an ibis at all but a stork), the smaller but more brightly coloured white ibis remained for me a bird wholly unknown. I heard vaguely of great rookeries where the bird bred in large numbers, of wet savannahs white with the snowy flocks. But these places seemed to me then as inaccessible as the poles, and to my own woods and marshes the white ibis never came and probably never would come. It was too strange, too tropical a creature—this bird which was like a great milk-white curlew and which was equipped with that

long, extraordinary sickle-bill of vivid hue. It seemed impossible that I should ever actually see in the flesh this marvellous exotic being, and thus there was spread around the white ibis an aura of mystery, and it took its place in my mind among those others that inhabited my enchanted kingdom and seemed to me legendary rather than real.

So, over all that day, in that hidden paradise of birds which was the white ibises' home, the glamour of an old enchantment was spread. Again my dream-world of the woods had come true; I was there in the heart of it, in the midst of its wildness and mystery; I was living in fact those scenes that I had lived in fancy long before. I had passed in an instant through the portals of my enchanted kingdom, or, rather, my enchanted kingdom had come to me, made tangible and visible as though at the touch of a magic wand.

I drank deep of its beauty that day. All around the rim of the little lake the ibises had their nests—we counted ten nests in one small cypress not over fifteen feet high—most of them containing

three greenish eggs marked with dark brown spots and blotches; and when their first fright had passed, many of the birds returned to their nesting trees, to stand poised and alert in the feathery cypress tops, while others still swept round and round above us among the herons whose nests, containing many young birds in all stages of growth, were scattered here and there among the trees. The ibises, swifter and more vigorous in flight than the herons, were an impressive spectacle in the air, where their black wing tips contrasted sharply with their white bodies, and their long necks and long curved bills gave them a strikingly fantastic appearance; but to my mind they were seen to even better advantage when they perched in the cypresses, around the margins of the lake, watching us anxiously, craning their necks this way and that. At such times their black wing tips were entirely concealed so that their plumage appeared wholly white. Against the dark green frondage behind them their spotless bodies shone with a dazzling brilliancy like that of polished marble, while their

orange-red or carmine bills and legs fairly blazed in the bright sun.

One might spend days or weeks in a bird-city like this one and still have much to learn about the daily life of its inhabitants. This is not the time or place for a detailed study of that kind. I brought away from the ibis-city something better than my pencilled notes—bright memories, vivid mind-pictures too strange and beautiful to fade. Most vivid of all was one.

We had found near the edge of the lake a nest of the prothonotary warbler. It was an extraordinarily interesting nest because it was not placed in a hole in a tree or stub like all other prothonotary nests, but was situated instead in a small pocket or recess in a mass of dry, dead duckweed clinging to the stem of a buttonwood bush eight inches above the surface of the water. It contained four nestlings, not long hatched, and sitting motionless in our punt at a distance of ten feet, we watched the parent birds feeding the young. It was the male's turn and he had come with a tidbit for the hungry little ones; but, in-

stead of flying straight to the nest, he perched on a cypress twig some distance from it and above it and stood there for some minutes singing sweetly in spite of the fact that all the while he held a tiny greenish larva in his bill.

Now the prothonotary warbler is in most regions one of the rarest of the wood warblers, and the male prothonotary in full nuptial plumage is perhaps the most beautiful of all that beautiful race of birds; and as this one stood singing there before us, seven white ibises and, a moment later, three black-crowned night herons dropped down from the air to a small cypress standing a little way out in the lake, so that, looking through an opening in the foliage in front of me, I could see all these birds at the same time.

They made a picture at once beautiful and fantastic—the tiny warbler, all glowing gold and delicate blue-gray, his head and breast aflame in the bright sun; beyond him the ibises, marble-white against the cypress foliage, their sickle bills as red as though they had been dipped in blood; and with the ibises the three night herons, ash-gray and glossy black, gro-

tesque and eerily solemn, true children of the dim, mysterious swamps. Watching them through the leafy opening in front of me, with the bright blue, wind-ruffled water under them and the dark, unbroken wall of forest beyond, I knew that I was gazing once more into the secret heart of that enchanted kingdom, that dream-world of the woods, where now and again—and let us thank Heaven for it—some beautiful dream comes true.

III

Wild Birds in a City Garden

Wild Birds in a City Garden

LYING in bed early one cool March morning, before the hush that hung over the sleeping city had been broken by the first of the noises that the young day would bring, I saw a compact black body shoot with the speed of a comet across the square of blue sky framed like a picture in the open window. In an instant I was on my feet; and in another instant, free from the coverlet that wrapped itself around me and almost threw me to the floor, I was leaning far out across the sill. Yonder it was, a hundred feet above the wet, glistening roofs to the northwest, cleaving the still, fresh air like some aërial torpedo. I gazed at it until it was gone, and doubtless my disappointment was written large upon my sleepy face. After all, it was only a loon—and I had hoped to see a wild goose!

Only a loon, bound, perhaps, for some cold glassy lake within the Arctic Circle—only a

Great Northern Diver, answering the call of the North. What was a loon that it should lure a sane man from his warm bed two hours too soon on a chilly morning in March? I asked myself the question as I stood by the window, looking across my neighbour's lot at the houses beyond, and at the broad steel-blue river to the south. A cardinal, half-hidden in the vivid new foliage of a sugarberry tree, glowed in the sunlight like a great drop of blood; and on a tall chimney farther away a slim gray mockingbird sang of the joys that April never failed to bring. Overhead, nineteen black vultures passed in procession, coming into town from their sleeping place across the river. A large flock of satiny waxwings lisping monotonously and all at once, settled among the branches of the sugarberry where the cardinal perched; and in the brown grasses beneath the window half a dozen white-throated sparrows, too busy or too hungry for song, searched industriously for the breakfast that is unlikely to reward the sluggard.

My gaze roved from cardinal to mockingbird, from waxwing to sparrow; and my thoughts

rushed northward with the vanished loon, over house-tops and fields and woods and marshes, on a journey that would not end until he slanted down at last to a lake that he remembered—a lake perhaps two thousand miles away. And then, of a sudden, the old wonder swept over me, the wonder that had thrilled me so often as I stood by that west window or under the garden elms. What if the loon were a common bird on the river in winter? It was, nevertheless, one of the wildest of the wild things; and from my bed in the midst of a busy city I had seen it! Strangely it may seem at first, but in reality naturally enough, I thought of an old friend who had died one hundred and fifteen years before—the Reverend Gilbert White of Selborne Parish, Hampshire, England.

Gilbert White is my precedent, my apology for this chapter. He was the real inventor of garden natural history, though his garden was larger than mine, taking in his whole parish. He would have revelled in the forests of wild America, for there he would have found many strange beasts and birds to watch and study; but

he preferred to spend his time, when he was not engaged with his clerical duties, studying the familiar creatures of his home. So, in a humble way, it has been with me. Some little part, at least, of the delight that the Rector of Selborne found in the wild life of his parish I have found in the wild life of my garden, which is not in the open country where wild creatures abound, but in one of the oldest parts of the old city of Charleston, South Carolina.

It is a garden with few flowers in it. It is not really a garden at all, but a small and unkempt green place of trees, shrubbery, canes, and grass. Birds do not care for flowers. They prefer vine-tangles and weeds, thickets and trees; and I am more interested in birds than in roses. Watching these birds of my garden at odd moments between working hours, I have learned things that I might never have learned in the woods; yet I have learned only a very small part of what there is to learn about the wild life of this small city lot. Scarcely a month passes that does not teach something new, and now and again there comes some great surprise. Not long ago, I looked out of

a window one morning and saw in one of the sugarberry trees behind the kitchen a bird that no one, so far as is known, had ever seen in a Charleston garden before. It was a yellow-crowned night heron, in the dark-brown, white-spotted plumage that every bird of that species wears during the first year or so of its life—a yellow-crowned night heron within fifty feet of my bedroom window!

That was a red-letter day; for although the yellow-crowned heron breeds along this coast, it is one of the shyest of its tribe, and you must go to the deep swamps or lonely marshes far from the homes of men if you would see it. Since that memorable morning this heron and I have become well acquainted with each other. This afternoon, as I write, he—in reality I do not know whether he is a gentleman or a lady—is standing on one long leg on a mulberry branch ten feet from my north window. I can stare at him as rudely and as boldly as I please, and he will not trouble to untwist his snaky neck or even open wide his half-closed yellow eyes. He knows the sweetness of idleness and apparently he delights

in the warm, languorous September sunshine. He will stand on one thin greenish leg on that mulberry limb, dozing placidly or preening his feathers with his long, stout bill, until the light begins to fade. Then he will sweep on his wide wings down to the lower end of my neighbour's lot, where the soil is wet and salty and where many little fiddler crabs dwell; and there, in the dusk and darkness, he will eat his supper.

Yesterday I had some fun with this solemn recluse of the swamps who has violated all the traditions of his kind by taking up his abode in town. For hours the rain had been falling steadily, and when the clouds broke in mid-afternoon the ground was soggy and was covered in low places with shallow pools. On the fence of the duck-yard, utterly oblivious to the perturbation with which the wondering ducks viewed his fantastic, melancholy figure, stood my long-legged friend, his narrow shoulders humped most unbecomingly, his thin neck looped like a moccasin hanging from a bush. Presently his neck lengthened, and spreading his wings, he skimmed along the ground past the wood-shed



YELLOW CROWNED NIGHT-HERON

to a shady alley underneath some elms. Here, in a large puddle some twenty feet long and half as wide, he began to stride slowly up and down as complacently as though he were in the heart of a cypress swamp where the foot of man had never trod.

For fifteen minutes I leaned against the corner of the wood-shed and watched him, wondering now and then whether any other city man had ever seen a wild yellow-crowned heron fishing in a pool of rainwater in his backyard. The heron saw me, but he ignored me in a manner that was almost humiliating. He did not hesitate to approach within a dozen feet of where I stood in plain view; while a pair of water thrushes, who were reaping a plentiful harvest of tiny insects among the dead leaves in the shallow water, were even bolder. They walked swiftly back and forth so close to me that I could have put my foot upon one of them, apparently ignorant of the fact that in the books they are called shy and timorous. Their food was so minute that I could not distinguish what it was, but the heron was after larger game. He was angling for angle-

worms. Now and again, as he stalked noiselessly through the water, his long beak flashed down to right or left; and each time death, as sudden as thought, claimed one of the little brown burrowers in the mould. I left him at last, walking about under the fig trees near the piazza, with all the nonchalance of a rooster hatched and reared in the yard, while the negro cook stood by the kitchen door and protested "befo' de Lawd" that she had never seen so strange a sight "sence de day she was bawn."

It is pleasant to recall some of the other great surprises—some of the other red-letter days in the history of the garden, each one of them rendered unforgettable by the coming of some unlooked-for feathered stranger. Such a day was that third of May when I looked up from my book to find a male scarlet tanager in the elm sapling beside the piazza. So rare is this bird in the lowlands of South Carolina that at the time when I saw this tanager there were only two other authentic records of the occurrence of the species in this region. Another day that will not soon be forgotten was a fourteenth of February

when a woodcock stood on the top of a flat stump not twenty feet from the piazza. Since then I have learned to look for woodcock in the garden in very cold weather and I have seen them there many times. There was an October morning which was made memorable by the arrival of two visitors from the North, of a species that few observers have ever seen on this coast—a pair of red-breasted nuthatches; while April 18, 1909, will stand always among the greatest of the great days of the garden, because on that morning I found in my elms a band of eight or ten pine siskins—a bird almost if not quite as rare in this part of the world as the scarlet tanager. I have seen the black-and-white warbler in the garden on December 1—at least a month later than the latest record made in this state by any other man; and the cedar waxwing has feasted on my mulberries on May 21, long after the last waxwing should have passed from the flat coast country, where the great flocks gather in winter and early spring, to the hills and mountains of the interior, where they disperse and build their nests.

After all, however, it is not in the chance visit of some rare member of the feathered tribes, nor in the occurrence at an unwonted time of a species common enough in its appointed season, that the charm of garden ornithology chiefly lies. I mention these matters merely to show that in a few instances, of interest to the professional naturalist rather than to the dilettante bird-gazer, this tiny area of city real estate is able to contribute its mite to the sum of what is known about the seasonal distribution and migrational movements of the birds of a great continent. For me, the fascination of the study—or diversion, as I should more modestly call it—is found, first in, the wonderful fact that even here amid the streets and houses of a modern city I see from time to time—in some cases, regularly each year—some of the feathered people that are thought to be most fearful of man and most characteristic of the wilderness; and second, in the continued presence, throughout the year, or during certain periods, of other birds, common and familiar, perhaps, and known by name to every country



PILEATED WOODPECKER



WOODCOCK

boy, yet possessing and sometimes betraying secrets that cannot be learned from the books of the wisest of those who have gone before us.

There is a sequestered corner of the garden where a few tall elms and bushy privet trees cast so dark a shade that even in midsummer the moist black soil is bare of weeds and grass. Here, in April, August, and September, I see the hooded warbler, resplendent in yellow and sable, gleaning the good things to be found in the thick foliage to the right, and in the trumpet-vines that clamber up the fence to the left. Hither in April and August comes the gorgeous prothonotary, whose flame-coloured breast is like a fragment of glowing cloud stolen from an autumn sunset and whose song rings just as clear and bold here amid the houses as in the sombre swamps that I must penetrate to find him when I go bird-hunting elsewhere than in the garden. The damp ground under the elms feels each autumn the dainty tread of the water thrush and of the ovenbird—members, although there is nothing in their English names to indicate the

relationship, of that same numerous family, the warblers or Mnioiltidæ, to which the prothonotary and the hooded warbler belong.

The clump of fig bushes hiding the angle formed by the fence and the back of a neighbour's outbuilding seems to possess a strange attraction for the sedate black and white warblers that visit it in spring and autumn; and it was in these same bushes that I saw the only black and white warbler ever seen by any man—so far as is known to science—in South Carolina in the month of December. When the first cool wave of autumn freshens the sultry air of September, many redstarts—with most of the red washed out of them—wage war on the slender pale-green larvæ that hide, all in vain, under the small saw-edged leaves of the terminal twiglets of the elms. In April, September, and October I sometimes see the handsome black-throated blue warbler, solemn with a most unwarblerlike solemnity, moving in silence from branch to branch where the shadow is darkest; while the parula, the prairie warbler, the summer yellow-bird, and, in the depth of winter, the hardy little yellow-

rump, are among the other warblers that are more or less familiar visitors to the spot. I wonder what Gilbert White would say if he knew that of the thirty-two species of *Mniotiltidæ* known to occur in this state—and some of them have been recorded only once or twice—I have seen fourteen in a single tiny nook of my city garden, while the warbler list for the garden as a whole numbers seventeen species.

Yet it is not the fragile warbler, child of the forest and swamp though he be, that brings the wilderness to me here in the city. Rather it is the lordly eagle that I sometimes see looking down at me, scornfully it seems, as he sweeps over, his snowy head glancing in the sun. It is the wide-winged black and white wood ibis, sailing high among the clouds, with outstretched neck, trailing legs, and stiff-spread, motionless pinions. It is the sharp-shinned hawk that smashes, like a miniature thunderbolt, into the rose-tangle where the English sparrows hold noisy conclave, and in an instant is up and away with his limp prize. It is the hurrying loon bound for the far boreal lake whose lonely shores will ring before

long with his wild laughter. And most of all, it is the noise of invisible myriads passing in the night.

Sitting on the piazza on cool evenings in late September, I hear the voices of feathered hosts that I cannot see. In hundreds and thousands and, it may be, in hundreds of thousands, they are streaming over my head, up in the black infinity between earth and stars. The whole air is full of them; now here, now there, now elsewhere, their various voices call to me out of the darkness. Some of the sounds I know well—the guttural “quok” of the black-crowned night heron, the high-pitched “skeow” of the green heron, the metallic chirp of the ricebird that travels in company with the larger wayfarers in the gloom. Others are sounds that I have never heard at any other time—that probably I shall never hear except on these autumnal nights when the far-called armies of the migrating birds are fleeing southward before the intangible, irresistible might of approaching winter.

Whence come these myriads and whither are they bound? By what strange sense do they

guide their certain flight through the uncharted spaces of the air? Where were they yesterday, and where will they be to-morrow? How many out of all that host will live to complete the long journey, escaping the innumerable perils that threaten them by land and sea? A month from now, perhaps, the small voice that spoke so plaintively a moment ago out of the dark void above my neighbour's roof may be heard by some fierce jaguar gliding like a ghost through the dim aisles of the Amazonian forest. A month from now, for aught I know, the little wings that fan the breeze above my garden to-night may be battling bravely but in vain in one of the furious hurricanes that sweep the Caribbean. Out of the unknown they come, and into the unknown they go, these unseen aerial regiments, pressing on blindly yet unerringly through the black waste of air, toward strange, far-off, tropical countries where winter is only a name.

From the vague dome-like mass of a fig tree near the piazza—a darker shadow among dark shadows—comes a clear flute-like whistle repeated again and again. It is a cardinal singing

in the gloom—singing perhaps to the yellow moon that peeps now and then from behind the scurrying drifts of cloud. I am ashamed. I have written page after page about the birds of my garden and scarcely a word have I written about those that should occupy the most exalted place. Tempted by the unusual, I have ignored the ordinary, which in all our affairs is generally the most important. I have sought to imprison in a few paragraphs some idea of the wild life that exists in this little domain; and because they are somewhat less wild than the others, I have passed over those more familiar birds that are most characteristic of the place. I do not know what the garden would be like if its cardinals and its mockingbirds were taken away. In sunshine and in rain, in summer and in winter, they are my comrades, these two. Better than the weather god himself, the red-coated cardinal knows when spring is coming: but he does not wait for spring, and I have heard him singing his bold, free song outside my window on Christmas morning—the first song of the season, as though he, too, were celebrating the great day. He is the

guardian spirit of the garden, my honest handsome Redcoat; and for him and his fair gentlemanly wife a goodly portion of cracked corn is placed each day on the feeding-stump under the graceful elm in which, years ago when it was a slender sapling, I saw the scarlet tanager.

Redcoat's life is an open book that he who runs may read. In the North he is called shy, secretive, skulking; but if the charge be true, this Yankee cardinal is not akin to the gallant feathered gentleman that I know. I have yet to see him do anything of which I might disapprove. True, he does not help in the making of the three nests that his mate builds each year in the garden; but is it not possible that the lady prefers to fashion the cradle of her prospective brood according to her own whims and with her own capable bill? Certainly, in all other respects, his treatment of his spouse is beautiful to behold, and in all nature you will not find a father more loving or less lazy. Morally—if there be such a thing as morality or its opposite among the wild creatures—he is the superior of “the Mocking-bird, Dawn's gay and jocund Priest,” though he lacks

the genius of that slim Shakespeare, as Lanier called the mocker, and the marvellous vocal powers to which the latter owes his fame.

The mockingbird's character is not without its defects; he strays now and then from the strait path of rectitude that Redcoat follows faithfully to the end of his days. The mockingbird is one of the bravest creatures that breathe the air. He will venture his life in defense of his nest, and I have seen him actually put a fair-sized dog to flight; but often have I heaped abuse upon his head because in utterly causeless fury he has smitten hip and thigh some unusual visitor to the garden; and as often have I granted him forgiveness of his sin when, after routing the inoffensive object of his wrath, he has mounted light as air to the topmost twig of the willow and, perching there, "superb and sole, upon a plumèd spray," has poured forth to the calm sky above such music as no other bird can make.

Contralto cadences of grave desire

.
Tissues of moonlight, shot with songs of fire;



MOCKING BIRD



SCARLET TANAGER

Bright drops of tune, from oceans infinite
Of melody, sipped off the thin-edged wave
And trickling down the beak,—discourses brave
Of serious matter that no man may guess,—
Good-fellow greetings, cries of light distress.

In the drawer of my desk is the unfinished manuscript of a history of the garden's birds—dry, concise (I hope), and matter-of-fact, treating each species separately and in order. Perhaps it would interest Gilbert White more than this rambling story; but, of the people that I know, many would judge its author a fool for spending precious moments in work so barren of material profit. Yet in this little green place amid the city's houses there is matter for a century of study. Within the boundaries of these fences I have learned a few things that have been worth learning, and I have discovered there something of what Hudson calls "the wonderfulness and eternal mystery of life itself."

That is the best thing that I have found in the garden. It was near the close of his long life that John Burroughs said, with characteristic simplicity, "The longer I live the more my mind dwells

upon the beauty and the wonder of the world.” He had found a good antidote for weariness of living, perhaps as good an antidote as it is possible to find; he was the possessor of a fortune that no one could take away save him whom the old Arabians called “the Destroyer of Delights and the Sunderer of Companies.” Even in a city garden one may find the path to such a fortune.

IV

Alligators

Alligators

ONE day in March Charles Livingston Bull and I were paddling in a small punt up Coming Tee lagoon. Spring was somewhat late in the Carolina plantation country. The cypresses around the edges of the lagoon were putting on their feathery foliage, the sweet gums were a brilliant green, golden jessamine glimmered on the margins of the swamps. We were looking for water turkeys, yellow-crowned night herons, and any other interesting forms of wild life that might show themselves. Suddenly Bull, who was in the bow of the punt, called my attention to a movement in the water close to the right-hand shore perhaps a quarter of a mile ahead of us. Evidently some large animal was putting out from the bank, and we knew at once what the animal was—a big alligator.

We wanted to get a good look at it, but the

situation required strategy. We paddled on slowly for some minutes then headed the punt toward the shore, some three hundred yards from the point where we had seen the movement in the water. As the boat's bow touched the bank, Bull stepped out in the shadow of the cypresses. I was about to follow him when, happening to turn my head, I saw an astonishing spectacle.

Through a floating field of lily pads and other aquatic plants a hundred yards or so away on the surface of the lagoon a large alligator was gliding straight toward us. He was coming about as fast as a hungry alligator can travel, which is fairly fast. As he pushed through the lily pads, tossing them aside, his great black head and five or six feet of his jagged back showing above the surface, he was a sight to make any man open his eyes. The punt had now drifted some yards out from the shore, and for a moment or two I wished that I was on the bank with Bull. I had no weapon, and I realized in a flash that this black dragon of the waters was amply big enough to smash the little boat with a blow of his powerful

tail and crunch my bones with his massive tusk-studded jaws.

The thought passed as quickly as it came—after all, I had enjoyed a fairly long acquaintance with 'gators—and I sat perfectly still in the punt, watching the monster come on. He was not a 'gator of the largest size, but the nearer he got to me the bigger he looked. His nine feet or so of armour-plated body appeared to me not less than eighteen, and his grotesque black head with raised periscope eyes and nostrils seemed as huge as the head of a hippopotamus.

Through the floating lily pads and into the open water nearer at hand the dragon surged onward, still heading straight for me. As has happened so often in history, it was a woman who rang the curtain down upon the drama. My wife and my sister had been following us up the lagoon in another punt. They had dropped far behind, but now they were near enough to see what was happening; and seeing this 'gator charging me in the punt and thinking that I was unaware of his approach, my wife began to shout somewhat excited warnings to me. I shook my head to quiet

her, and the 'gator, spotting the movement instantly, sank like a submerging submarine beneath the waters.

This was an interesting little adventure because it illustrated in an unusually dramatic way a phase of alligator life that is little known. I was never in the slightest danger, of course. Alligators do not attack human beings unless brought to bay or cut off from some near-by body of water which they are trying to reach. This alligator had not the slightest suspicion that he was charging a man. Lying far out in the lagoon, with only his eyes and nostrils showing, he saw the punt against the bank and detected some movement in it, perhaps as Bull stepped ashore. Undoubtedly he believed that this unfamiliar object at the waterside was a woods-ranging hog, and being in all likelihood very hungry after his long winter fast, he charged the punt recklessly without stopping to investigate.

Probably many an adventurous youngster has felt from time to time that much of the romance of country life disappeared when all the large wild animals that preyed on the farmer's live-

stock were killed off. It must have been thrilling to be a farmer in those times when any night might bring a raid on the hogs or cattle by a panther or a big black bear. That is one reason why the alligator is to me a creature of extraordinary interest. It brings a savour of the early wilderness and the early wilderness days. It is the only wild animal left in the eastern half of the United States, with the exception of an occasional black bear, which still carries on in true wilderness style the war that the wilderness used to wage against the flocks and herds of civilized man.

That it does this is not generally known for the reason that only in certain parts of its range are the conditions such as to make the alligator a formidable enemy to livestock. Even here in the old plantation country of coastal South Carolina, where the conditions are almost perfect for the alligator, its depredations are not sufficient to warrant its extermination in the region as a whole. But there are certain parts of the plantation country—the Low Country, as it is called in contradistinction to the rolling country

of the interior—where the 'gator is an enemy to be reckoned with. Thus he is to my mind, though most farmers and planters probably will not agree with me, a precious link with those glamorous and adventurous early days when the pioneer's trusty rifle was the only thing that protected his livestock from the wild denizens of the untamed forest.

The average American thinks of the alligator as a Florida animal and is much surprised to learn that it exists elsewhere perhaps more abundantly to-day than in Florida, where its numbers have been greatly reduced. In the South Carolina Low Country it abounds. Here is a beautiful and romantic region of many rivers and creeks, of many placid lagoons, of many cypress-bordered backwaters or "reserves" of the old rice-planting days; and in most of these the alligator is at home. Not long ago Charles Bull and I spent a morning in a leafy ambush beside a little fresh-water lagoon within half-an-hour's ride of a large plantation house, and there was scarcely a minute when we could not see at least six large

alligators, sometimes as many as ten, in the small area of weedy water in front of us.

There is all the difference in the world between a captive alligator in a tank and a big bull dragon of the waters in his native wild. Something incredibly fantastic, something monstrously uncouth and outlandish invests such a scene as that which we witnessed from our hiding place beside the lagoon.

Dense woods surrounded the little lake and, except for a few bird-songs, the only sound was the low moaning of the Atlantic billows hardly more than a quarter of a mile away. In the still waters in front of us, eyeing us warily—for we had not gained our hiding place unobserved—the long, black, armoured masters of the lagoon lurked, grim and forbidding, waiting and watching with the long patience of their race, patience that is well-nigh inexhaustible.

Some of them lay just beneath the surface, only their nostrils and the two black knobs which were their eyes being visible. Through those eyes, raised a little above the level of the broad, flat-

tened head, they could keep watch without exposing an inch of body to a possible rifle-shot, much as a submerged submarine views the surrounding sea by means of a periscope. Others, at a greater distance, lay at the surface with all the upper part of the head and five or six feet of the plated spiny back plainly visible. In that wild and solitary place, with the weedy water around them and the jungle-like woods for background, they seemed worthy descendants of the mighty dinosaurs of the Jurassic inland seas. Yet even more strange and more grotesque was an apparition that now and again fixed our attention upon a certain spot on the surface of the lagoon directly in front of us and not more than twenty yards away.

At that spot, at more or less regular intervals, the black water stirred uneasily and a huge rounded muzzle appeared above the surface, rising higher and higher very slowly. Little by little it emerged, growing larger and larger, taking on a more definite shape and yet appearing each instant more chimerically shapeless—until at last we saw nearly the whole head of a

great alligator, covered with green and yellow water weeds resembling long wet hair, thrust above the water, and tilted upward as though the creature were gazing at the sky or the tree-tops above the shores of the lagoon. Not only the head but the whole broad blunt muzzle with its protruding tusks, the whole wicked chin and much of the scaly throat were exposed; and sometimes, when it thus rose slowly from the depths, this fearful dragon-countenance was turned toward us, so that we could see its appalling breadth and thickness, while at other times we viewed it in profile and could measure its length with our eyes.

As again and again the huge uplifted head rose slowly to remain exposed for some minutes and then sink out of sight, the spectacle puzzled us more and more. Alligators do not rise in this fashion with uptilted muzzle but come up with the head parallel with the plane of the water so that the periscope eyes appear first above the surface. At last the mystery was solved.

Near that monstrous up-thrust countenance another great alligator head appeared, not tilted

upward like the first but resting flat in the water and pointing away from the other head. It rose higher, until part of the creature's back was visible; and we saw then that the first 'gator was lying with its lower throat resting upon the submerged body of the other, and that this was why, when the second 'gator rose at intervals close to the surface, the head of its companion appeared above the water in that grotesque uptilted attitude. A simple enough explanation, as most woods explanations are; but I have seen no more fantastic sight in the woods than that uplifted dragon-face, with its green and yellow water weed hair, rising mysteriously from the depths and staring at the sky.

It is only in certain parts of the plantation country, where the conditions are exceptionally favourable to the saurian marauders, that the alligators are able to make serious inroads on the planter's livestock. The lagoon mentioned just now, where Bull and I were studying 'gators recently, is situated in the woods on a long narrow island with the sea on one side of it and open marshes on the other. A friend of mine attempted

to raise hogs on this island but found that the 'gators got nearly all the young pigs. On another plantation some thirty miles inland a negro whom I know waxed eloquent on the subject of alligators the last time I talked with him, his eloquence being due to the fact that the reptilian raiders had taken seven of his half-grown hogs in rapid succession, deliberately stalking them in the open rice-fields bordering the creek near his house.

Of course, it is only occasionally that an alligator is able to enjoy pork. As a rule, his diet consists of fish and frogs with now and then a waterfowl or a marsh rabbit. If there is one thing that he loves better than pork, it is dog. In this region a number of dogs are taken by 'gators every year; and this, even more than his occasional inroads on the planters' woods-ranging hogs, is responsible for the incessant warfare waged against the 'gator. Except in winter, when the saurians have retired to their secret dens, they are a serious menace to the lean, long-eared hounds of the deer-hunting packs which sometimes, in the excitement of the chase, follow

the deer into waters teeming with unseen dangers.

There are many instances of such tragedies, though in most cases they are not witnessed by human eyes. A dog is missing at the end of the hunt. Nobody knows positively what became of him, yet any hunter can easily reconstruct the scene; the great black saurian lying like a log among the lily-pads, listening with a grim glint in his cold, inscrutable, vertically slitted eyes to the approaching music of the pack; a buck plunging into the river or lagoon, followed a few moments later by a hound or perhaps several hounds: along armoured submarine gliding swiftly through the water, only its periscope eyes showing above the surface; a scream of agony, a bloody swirl, then silence as the monster sinks with its prey.

Apparently the deer is seldom, if ever, attacked. Fawns are taken from time to time, but I know of no instance in which a full-grown deer has met death in a 'gator's jaws. A dog, once seized, has almost no chance of escape; yet I know of one case in which a large and powerful hound, pulled under by an alligator in a deep, broad river, freed himself in some miraculous way from his

terrible assailant and reached the shore not much the worse for his experience.

In deep water the alligator's huge jaws, studded with long, stout teeth, are his primary weapons of offence. Approaching his quarry just below the surface with only his eyes visible, or rising suddenly from the depths, his attack is all the more paralyzing because of its utter unexpectedness. On land and sometimes when stalking a victim at the water's edge he relies largely on his extraordinarily powerful tail. The entire body is bent like a bow and the long, plated tail, compressed or flattened at the sides, sweeps the victim within reach of the waiting jaws.

Whatever his method, the alligator at the decisive moment acts with surprising quickness—quickness little short of amazing to anyone whose acquaintance with the big saurian has been confined to captive specimens in a tank. In the water his victim, as a rule, has no intimation of his proximity until the great jaws close upon their prey, and even on land, where he is not at home, he is capable of swift and dramatic action when the conditions favour him. A negro on a planta-

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tion which I visit frequently witnessed a remarkable instance of the 'gator's quickness in offence even when out of his proper element. This negro's dog was following a rabbit trail near the edge of a thicket in a large open pasture when suddenly the man saw a large alligator rear himself out of the weeds and, apparently knocking the dog over with a lightning-like sweep of his tail, seize the animal in his jaws. The man was so astonished that he stood gaping, and the alligator got safely into a deep pool just within the thicket's edge with his prey.

On the same plantation where this incident took place, a hog, which had been ranging in the woods and open pastures, was found badly injured, the skin and flesh of one flank having been slashed and nearly torn off the animal. What had happened to it was plain enough, and the master of the plantation acted promptly. He took his shotgun with him—it happened that his rifle was unavailable at the moment; and it happened, too, that his supply of buckshot shells was exhausted so that he had to rely on cartridges loaded with number eights. Making his way into

a thicket whence the wounded hog had emerged and in which was a pool of fresh water where the plantation stock often drank, he sat down behind a convenient bush near the margin of the pool and waited patiently.

The water was as smooth as glass; there was nothing to show that beneath its surface lurked black armoured death. After a while he heard the grunting of pigs coming down to the water, and presently, as the sounds grew louder, he saw two rounded knobs appear upon the surface of the pool.

It was a matter of moments then. A pig came out of the bushes and began to root in the muck at the water's edge, and the two knobs moved slowly forward, so slowly as scarcely to make a ripple on the glassy surface. Suddenly, when those two knobs were no more than a few yards from the rooting pig, they were transformed into a long, hideous head. In another instant the final lunge would have been launched, but at that moment the shotgun roared and at that close range the charge of number eights tore a gaping wound. It required several additional shots to

finish the marauder, which measured nine feet three inches from nose to tail-tip.

I had, one July day, an interesting demonstration of the alligator's inordinate fondness for dog meat. I had just built a camp, a small three-room cottage, on the bank of a salt-water creek. We were spending a week or two there and I had my two English setters with me. Because the creek was salt—in fact, the open Atlantic lay directly in front less than a quarter of a mile distant across the level marshes—the thought of alligators had not entered my head, and one of the dogs, a great water-lover, had been in and out of the creek repeatedly.

One afternoon I was sitting on the bank of the creek fishing within a stone's throw of the house when I saw an alligator come swimming around a bend of the stream. The two dogs were lying on the bank near me, so I knew that Pete, the water-lover, was in no immediate danger, and I watched the 'gator curiously as it came on, its head and four or five feet of its back showing above the surface. Thirty yards from the spot where I was sitting, the saurian ranged up against the op-

posite bank and lay there motionless. Just at this moment a negro boy approached bringing me some bait, and the two dogs began barking at him.

Instantly the 'gator shifted its position and in another instant it started at full speed across the creek straight for us. Evidently it had not seen the dogs until their barking attracted its attention. Wherever the dogs moved along the high creek bank the 'gator headed for them, apparently careless of my presence. Plainly the dogs' voices excited it powerfully so that it appeared almost oblivious of danger; and finally, after I had taken the dogs into the house, the saurian came to rest against the sloping bank in front of the house, not more than fifty feet from the piazza, and lay there grimly waiting. I rather enjoy having 'gators in my front yard—they add a certain touch of wildness to the scenery—but in this case it was the 'gator's life or Pete's, since the dog could not be kept out of the water, and his next swim would undoubtedly be his last.

The boldness of this saurian dog-lover (in a decidedly grim sense) was exceptional. He was not

a really large 'gator, measuring two inches less than eight feet in length; yet his jaws were amply powerful enough to have crushed out the setter's life at a single snap. Had he been older and larger, he would undoubtedly have been much warier, for the alligator gains in cunning as his years increase. Hence the really big bulls are comparatively seldom seen and are still less often shot.

The largest alligator of which I have any certain knowledge measured a few inches more than fourteen feet. It was killed on Buckfield Plantation, about sixty miles from Charleston, by my friend Arthur T. Wayne, the well-known ornithologist, and Mr. Eugene E. Gregorie, a planter. I have heard also of a sixteen-footer killed some twenty years ago, but cannot vouch for this measurement. Twelve-footers are rare but probably not so rare as most naturalists who have had only limited experience in alligator country believe; and a twelve-foot 'gator is at least twice as impressive as an eight-footer because, with every inch of length gained, the animal increases surprisingly in bulk.

Opinions vary as to the maximum size attainable by the alligator in a state of nature before the multitude of hunters and the development of the modern rifle made it difficult for any saurian to live out its allotted span. Perhaps the most interesting evidence bearing on the subject is that of William Bartram, the botanist, who travelled through the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida in 1773. Bartram declares that he saw alligators twenty feet long and heard of others measuring twenty-two or twenty-three feet. In view of the much greater abundance of alligators in those days, and considering how difficult it must have been for the Indians, with their primitive weapons, to kill the great armour-plated saurians, it is hardly wise to dismiss Bartram's assertion with an incredulous smile.

A good deal of what the old travellers wrote about the alligator and various other animals of the early American woods appears nowadays rather difficult to swallow. Due allowance, however, must be made for the very different conditions existing then and for the surprising quickness with which even the duller-witted

forms of animal life learn that civilized man is the most dangerous of all antagonists.

Bartram gives a thrilling narrative of how he was attacked by large numbers of alligators of much greater size than any to be found to-day. Some seventy years later Sir Charles Lyell, the famous English geologist, visited South Carolina and Georgia and wrote as follows: "When I first read Bartram's account of alligators more than twenty feet long and how they attacked his boat and bellowed like bulls and made a sound like distant thunder, I suspected him of exaggeration; but all my inquiries here and in Louisiana convinced me that he may be depended upon." Lyell himself then proceeds to tell, upon the authority of his host, Mr. Hamilton Couper of Darien, Georgia, a naturalist of note, an alligator story which, perhaps, is not really as improbable as it may seem to us nowadays.

"Mr. Couper told me," Lyell writes, "that in the summer of 1845 he saw a shoal of porpoises coming up to that part of the Atlamaha where the fresh and salt water meet, a space about a mile in length, the favourite fishing ground of the

alligators, where there is brackish water, which shifts its place according to the varying strength of the river and the tide. Here were seen about fifty alligators, each with head and neck raised above water, looking down the stream at their enemies, before whom they had fled terror-stricken and expecting an attack. The porpoises, no more than a dozen in number, moved on in two ranks and were evidently complete masters of the field. So powerful, indeed, are they that they have been known to chase a large alligator to the bank and putting their snouts under his belly, toss him ashore."

Porpoises—or dolphins, to give them their correct name—sometimes ascend the creek in front of my cottage where the alligator mentioned a while ago displayed so grim an interest in my dogs; and I know now that in summer alligators occasionally cruise past the house, coming down the creek with the ebb tide from the fresh waters some miles away. Perhaps I may yet sit on my piazza and see a dolphin toss a big 'gator into my front yard!

Whatever may have been true in Bartram's

day, alligators do not now attack man. Of course a big alligator, trying to get back into his watery refuge, will charge any man that gets in his way; but once in his own element, he will sink out of sight immediately and either remain completely hidden or else reveal nothing except his periscope eyes and nostrils so long as the man remains in the vicinity. It would probably be safe nine times out of ten to go swimming in waters abounding with alligators; yet it is as well to remember that in the water a man may not be quickly recognizable as a man. Undoubtedly, if the saurian tried to do so, any alligator of respectable size could pull even the strongest swimmer under without the slightest difficulty, while the tusk-studded jaws of a big bull could crush the bones of a human leg or arm as easily as a man crushes a match stick with his teeth. During the past summer a boy fishing in a large fresh-water river not far from my home stepped either on or very close to an alligator lying in the mud. The big reptile seized the boy's leg in his jaws, inflicting injuries so serious that the boy had to be taken to the city for treatment in a

hospital. It hardly seems fair, however, to regard this as an attack, the 'gator probably having acted in self-defence.

The alligator in his native environment is, in some respects, a difficult animal to study. Nobody knows much about what he does when he sinks out of sight beneath the waters. A great deal of what is popularly known about him is not true.

It is not necessary, as most people suppose, to shoot him in the eye in order to kill him. His leathery armour was doubtless an effectual safeguard against the Indian's arrows, but it cannot stop a modern rifle bullet. Yet he is very tenacious of life, and unless hit in some vital spot, he will probably recover. A badly hit 'gator nearly always sinks, but some twelve or fifteen hours later the carcass will rise to the surface to float belly upward, the short thick legs and hand-like claws extended grotesquely toward the sky.

It is a mistake to take a big 'gator that you have just "killed" into the boat with you. No matter how dead he may seem to be, it is possible that he will shortly come to life, and he can make

things exceedingly uncomfortable for you at close quarters. It is a mistake, too, to suppose that when you have severed the head of an alligator you can take what liberties you choose with him. A friend of mine once placed his booted foot against the jaw of a 'gator whose brain had been pierced with a rifle bullet more than an hour before and whose head had then been cut off. Instantly the jaws of the severed head came together with a resounding snap, one of the long tusks piercing the tough leather and giving my friend the surprise of his life.

It is not true that it takes an alligator a hundred years to attain a length of ten feet. On the contrary, a ten-foot alligator may be actually less than ten years old. Nor is it true that all American saurians are alligators and all foreign saurians crocodiles. Our alligator has a close but much smaller relative in China, and there is a species of crocodile in lower Florida. The books say that our American alligator is far on the road to extinction. This is one instance in which we need not believe the books. The alligator is going to be with us for many a year to come,

though it is high time laws were passed to control the commercial hide-hunters who periodically reduce the number of large specimens, thus taking away from our rivers and lagoons one of the most interesting spectacles that they afford.

One day a year or so ago my wife and I drove about sixty miles from our home in Charleston to pick up a New York editor who is a friend of mine. A young alligator about two feet long trundled across the road in front of us and, thinking that my editor-friend might be interested in him, I jumped out, caught the youngster and put him in the back of the car, the rear seat of which was unoccupied. My wife, sitting beside me on the front seat, had her hands folded in her lap under a rug laid across her knees. Presently she felt something cold nuzzling her hand and, lifting the blanket, she discovered the youthful saurian climbing into her lap.

This was a degree of familiarity not wholly agreeable, since even a young alligator can bite hard when the spirit moves him; so after we had picked up our editor at the appointed rendezvous and were on our way back to Charleston

with him, we released our baby saurian in a small marshy pond beside the road. Somehow or other I have thought of him often since. He was a pretty little fellow, all shining black and bright yellow, and all he wanted when he climbed into my wife's lap under the rug was to get warm. What became of him, I wonder, in the new hunting ground where we left him, miles from his babyhood home?

He had already passed the most dangerous period of his infancy. Probably about two years had elapsed since he, with his brothers and sisters, who may have numbered thirty or forty, first saw the light of day. Whether he ever knew or even saw his mother is problematical. The female alligator goes to considerable trouble in making her nest, scooping out a shallow depression in the earth where she deposits her eggs, and then pulling dead leaves and trash over them until she has made a mound about two feet high and four or five feet wide. But she does not sit upon the nest, leaving the sun to perform the work of incubation; and opinions differ as to whether she is commonly present to welcome the

youngsters when they make their way out of the nest toward the nearest water.

They are only eight or nine inches long at the time of hatching, and though their journey to the water is generally a short one, it is sometimes perilous. Foxes, raccoons, possums, and birds of prey are dangerous enemies; and when the lagoon or river has been reached, other dangers await the young adventurers there. Some saurians appear to be decidedly cannibalistic and, though opinion is not unanimous upon the subject, it is possible that the parents of an alligator brood—the father, at any rate—are sometimes more inclined to dine upon their young than to defend them after they have reached their watery home.

Probably only a small proportion of the baby saurians that are hatched live long enough to attain the two-foot length of the precocious youngster that climbed into my wife's lap; but once they have attained that length, the chances are that comparatively plain sailing lies ahead of them until they have reached a size likely to attract the attention of man, the most formidable of all their foes.

That time comes much more quickly than is generally supposed. The common idea that an alligator grows very slowly is an error. Experiments have proved that a 'gator grows on the average considerably more than an inch a month until a length of something like twelve feet has been attained, when the rate of growth becomes much slower. This, however, while applicable to regions of perpetual summer where growth continues uninterruptedly, may not be true in cooler districts where the 'gator goes into seclusion and practically hibernates during the winter months.

It is due largely to its habit of denning up during the winter season that the alligator owes its present abundance here in the Carolina plantation country. In Florida, where it is active the year round, it has been decimated. Here it lies safe from man in its secret dens during most of the cooler portion of the year when the hunters are abroad in the woods, and it does not emerge again until March, when the hunting season is over. Spring is a dangerous season for the 'gators, the more so because they appear to be exception-

ally hungry then after their long fast, and are perhaps less cautious than usual. But soon the hot weather comes, the season that the 'gator loves best; and in the heat of summer few men are inclined to spend much time in the steaming swamps or on the inland rivers and lagoons.

So I think that the two-foot 'gatorling, who climbed into my wife's lap that day last year (I am using him as a sort of epitome of his race), is probably alive and flourishing to-day and that he has a very good chance to enjoy life for a considerable time to come. For my part, I wish him well. I like alligators. I like to see them and to hear them; the bellowing of a big bull dragon, by the way, in one of the most impressive sounds of the American woods, an eloquent reminder of those colourful early days when a man could scarcely sleep near one of the great swamps because of the unearthly chorus of the wild beasts.

And the bigger the 'gator is the better I like him. He adds something of mystery, something of prehistoric strangeness to the lovely moss-tapestried lagoons and the slow, winding rivers of the plantation country. He is not beautiful; but

he is fascinatingly interesting, the largest and most formidable (except to man) of the surviving wild killers of our eastern woods, practically the only wild animal left in the eastern part of the continent that can bring back the thrill of pioneer times by raiding the farmer's herds. Surely it is by no means a lamentable thing in these over-civilized days that, here in one of the oldest parts of America, that touch of the unspoiled and shaggily romantic wilderness survives.

V

The Miracle of Life

The Miracle of Life

IT WAS October in the Adirondacks. For the first time I saw the high forests of the North in the full splendour of their autumn colouring. The painted hillsides of the Catskills had filled me with inexpressible delight, but it was in the wild, uninhabited solitude above the small headwaters of the Hudson, where Tahawus, the Cloud-Splitter—Mount Marcy, as the white man calls him—rears his imposing bulk, that the pageant of the autumn woods reached its climax.

Here was a miracle almost beyond belief: a mountain wilderness of vast extent aflame with all the most brilliant and splendid hues that man may dream of or desire; where every leaf of all those untold billions of leaves was as gorgeous as a flower, so that each tree of all those millions of noble trees stood clothed in refulgent glory; where all the most radiant and most royal colours of the sunrise and the sunset had been laid, in

intricate and infinitely varied patterns, upon the hills until the world was a green world no longer, but an unimaginable paradise of gold and purple and rosy pink and deep red and blazing scarlet.

Fairer than those famed fields Elysian
Or the Fortunate Isles past the skirts of the day.

To come into this wonderland of the high Northern woods for the first time from a lowland region, where autumn, though she is lovely there also, affords no such astounding display of intense and vivid colouring, was a bewildering experience. I was like a man in a dream, like

—one who of some subtle cup hath drunk,
And walks the while as in a golden vision.

For a time I was absorbed in the beauty around me and had no thought except of that beauty. But, little by little, another emotion awoke in my mind, a faint, dim desire or longing for something which seemed to be lacking. Presently, when this desire had become more definite, I realized what it was. It was life that I longed for—the sight or sound of some living wild thing. It was this that

I missed and missed so poignantly that even the incredible splendour of those Northern woods could not atone for their strange, sombre silence and their depressing lifelessness.

I thought of my own woods far away which, at that season, would be astir with the wings of migrant warblers; and of my own sky where, only a week or so before, I had seen great white-headed eagles and stately wood ibises soaring against the blue; and of my own marshes where I had watched the squadrons of the curlew and the regiments of the plover and other shore birds moving actively about at feed. And I said to myself that, with all its opulent beauty, this paradise of the Northern hills lacked the most vital thing of all—the beauty of life. It was a dead and desolate paradise, I thought, from which all living things had fled; and I grew suddenly weary of the rich loveliness around me and all the colours of that painted, lifeless solitude, and wished myself back in my own land where I might hear the voices of birds in the thickets and see a tracery of wild wings against the sky.

It was at this moment that he came—a golden

fox gliding soundlessly out of the forest into the road ahead of us. Only for a fraction of a minute was he visible. Before he had reached the middle of the road he saw us, and instantly he turned and, with a lithe, smooth, sinuous motion which somehow enhanced his wildness and his beauty, he slipped toward the cover of the low birches bordering the road. Yet, before entering them, he paused, and for a brief moment looked back at us over his shoulder, his long pointed ears cocked alertly, his plummy tail held low. Then, like some brilliant, shimmering phantom of the forest, his golden form faded and was lost to view in the feathery foliage of the birch thicket.

I have seen many fine sights in the woods, and so has every man and woman who goes into the woods with eyes that are not blind; but I have never seen a more beautiful thing than that golden fox in that painted forest of the Adirondack hills. It was as though Nature, indignant over the wrong that I had done her when in my mind I called that gorgeous Northern wilderness of hers a lifeless desert, depressing because of its lifelessness, had determined to teach me my folly

by showing me a picture of life so beautiful that it could never fade from memory.

In every detail it was perfect. This was a red fox that she showed us, and red foxes are not rare. But it was no ordinary red fox such as every farmer's boy in the North has seen. It was a red fox whose fur was lighter and brighter than most, so that the animal, instead of being rusty-red or fulvous, was of a bright, soft, misty gold: and no other colour could have been so beautiful or could have produced the same effect, because it was in a golden place in the woods that we saw this fox, a place where the opening in which he appeared was curtained and overhung by the brilliant yellow frondage of rock maple and dense, luxuriant birch shining and glimmering in the sun. Hence what we saw was a golden creature framed in gold; and as he stood there in the narrow road with the lustrous tapestry of the golden boughs around him, it was as though the gold of that golden forest had taken on life and bodily form—as though from that gold of leaves and sunshine Nature had fashioned this lithe, wild, beautiful golden creature to

show him to us for one brief moment and then to snatch him away again into those golden woods out of which he came.

It was all over in a far shorter time than I have taken to tell it here; and the fox had done nothing remarkable, had taught us nothing new about fox life. Yet—aside from the extraordinary beauty of the spectacle—he had done a great thing for us—or at least for me, to whom those high forests of the North were an unopened book; for in an instant he had dispelled that impression of lifelessness which had taken possession of my spirit, and had proved that, silent and still as those woods were, there was life in them. In many other ways that lesson was to be impressed, for, though birds were rare at that season—most of the migrants having passed on to the South—we saw deer and chipmunks and red and gray squirrels, some of the hardier finches, robins, red-shouldered and Cooper's hawks, and my first pair of moose birds or Canada jays. But it was that golden fox which first taught me that the Northern woods were alive—an important lesson, too, since thence-

forward that painted wilderness of the Adirondacks was no longer in my mind a glittering, varicoloured desert, beautiful to the eye but oppressive to the soul because it lacked the crowning element of beauty—life.

It is life that lights up the woods. Not long ago, remembering many happy hours spent there in the past, I visited a little lake here in my own lowland country eight hundred miles from those high Adirondack hills where we saw the red fox whose coat was the colour of gold; but when I had reached the place, I found it changed and far from beautiful because a long drought had lowered the level of the water, and the surface of the lake was no longer a clear expanse reflecting the blue of the sky and the shapes of the drifting white clouds. So low had the water sunk that now innumerable blackened stubs and snags projected from the surface everywhere; and the aquatic growths around the margins of the lake, instead of appearing luxuriant and green, lay brown and sere because the water on which their life depended no longer washed their roots and stems.

It was a depressing spectacle, all the more depressing after the vivid beauty of the Northern woods whose gorgeous colours still blazed in my mind. I was about to turn my back at once upon so unpromising a spot when something caught my eye. Beside a floating island of lily pads near the shore of the lake six small dark objects rested on the water. I knew that they were either wild ducks or grebes, and, encouraged by this evidence of the presence of bird-life, I moved along the shore to a point opposite the lily-pad island.

I saw then that of the six birds floating there five were female bluebill ducks, all of them apparently asleep or, at any rate, resting motionless on the water, while the sixth was a pied-billed grebe. Watching them idly, several minutes passed before I became aware of another bird which all the while had been in plain view—a solitary coot, standing perfectly still on a lily pad, his back turned to me. Meanwhile, two song sparrows, hidden in the grasses just in front of me, had begun to sing in subdued but singularly sweet and tinkling tones, answering each other

again and again, as though conducting a conversation in song.

So for a while I lingered, still intending, however, to move on in a few minutes to some more interesting spot. But somehow, because there was some life in it after all, the little half-dried-up lake, with its withered grasses and its blackened tree-stumps, was not so unattractive as it had been at first; and the minutes passed, and I still waited, watching the motionless ducks and the pied-billed grebe and the coot perched on his lily pad like a blue-black image and listening to the faint, sweet sparrow songs. Yet it was a rather dull and listless entertainment, for the birds before me made no move; and probably I should have passed on after a little had not my eye caught a sudden flicker near the farther shore of the lake.

Studying the spot intently, I saw that a great blue heron was standing in the shallows there, a heron which I had probably already seen as my gaze roved about the lake, but which I had mistaken for the slender broken stem of a dead sapling; and scanning the other stubs and snags

projecting from the water near the shores, I found two more which were less black than the others and which were not stubs or snags, but herons standing motionless and statuesque in the shallow water.

This discovery again delayed my departure. I began to feel that, in spite of its unprepossessing appearance, the lake was by no means so disappointing as it had seemed. Even now, when it was shrunken and shorn of most of its own beauty, it was a haunt of birds; and even those dead, protruding snags took on a certain interest now, since some of them were really tall, fantastic feathered fishermen waiting in ambush for their prey. The place was still strangely motionless and silent, except for the repressed tinkling music of the song sparrows, and there was a dull grayness over it all so that there was little to attract the casual eye. But still I waited, feeling vaguely that something would happen soon, that before long this scene of still life would be stirred to activity.

Presently there was a movement among the ducks floating beside the lily-pad island. One by

one they seemed to awaken and began to swim slowly about, dabbling in the water; and the grebe who was with them also began to glide here and there, diving occasionally and emerging yards distant from the spot where he had vanished. Soon in low willows behind me I heard the chirp of myrtle warblers, punctuated now and then by the note of a phœbe and the cheerful calls of chickadees; and suddenly close to the farther shore of the lake, near the spot where two of the herons were standing, eight or ten low, black stumps, scattered among scores of other precisely similar stumps, became alive.

I saw them then as a company of coots that had been resting motionless on the water near the shore where the surface was dotted with dark snags; and while I watched them, the grayness over the lake lightened gradually, so slowly that I was scarcely aware of the change until all at once I realized that the grayness was gone, and the surface of the water was now sky-blue with ripples of silver, and all the birds floating upon it were more sharply visible than before.

I was watching the coots near the opposite

shore and the ducks near the lily-pad island close at hand—I could distinguish now their brilliant golden eyes—when suddenly the air above the lake became a living whirlpool, a flashing, glimmering maelstrom of life. A great flock of white-bellied swallows had appeared, a flock of several hundred, and, as though overjoyed at finding the lake, they were holding high carnival in the air.

Round and round the whole winged army whirled, at first in a compact body, then spreading more widely, their white breasts flashing like silver, their blue-black backs glinting and shimmering. Now they formed a wide wheel or disk revolving swiftly; now they were an ellipse one end of which was higher than the other; now the centre of the revolving mass dropped lower until the flock formed a huge funnel the tip of which nearly touched the surface of the water. Again the tip of the funnel lifted, and, as though one will controlled them all, the whole flock, still whirling wildly, shot toward the head of the lake, soared higher, swung lower, broke suddenly into an irregular mob of birds, darting and

shooting in every direction: then, moved by some mysterious impulse apparently born at the same instant in every bird of all that multitude, they were all in close formation again, all again parts of one whole, a great wheel of feathered life, shifting, changing, swiftly revolving, sometimes rising a hundred feet into the air, sometimes dipping so close to the surface that bird after bird struck the water with a splash.

No, my little lake was not dead; and if there had been nothing else, those whirling swallows, so marvellously graceful and swift, would have made my visit worth while. But the swallows were not all; for now the spell of lethargy and languor seemed to have been lifted suddenly, and the still waters were alive.

I was aware all at once of squadrons of swimming birds moving outward from the shores and converging toward the centre of the lake. The ducks that had been swimming languidly about near the lily-pad island formed one such squadron. With them swam the grebe that had been in their company, and a little behind them the coot that had stood so long on the

lily pad. From the farther shore, where the two herons still stood motionless, moved another squadron composed entirely of coots; and from far up the lake, each approaching from a different direction but all moving toward the centre, came three other squadrons, some fifty birds in all, ten or fifteen bluebill ducks and thirty-five or forty pied-billed grebes.

For two reasons the spectacle fascinated me: first, because I had seldom or never before seen so many grebes together; second, because of the strange atmosphere of purposefulness which seemed to invest the whole proceeding, as though these squadrons of birds, heading from so many different directions toward the same spot at the lake's centre, were gathering there in fulfilment of some well-understood design. I waited eagerly as the converging squadrons neared one another, and I saw them all meet almost at the same moment and merge into one fleet of birds, grebes, ducks, and coots, associating with utmost friendliness and apparently delighting in one another's company.

For a while a sort of joyous commotion

animated the whole fleet; the coots swimming briskly here and there amid the others with a great bobbing of heads; the bluebills cruising quickly about and now and then ducking beneath the surface; the grebes, which seemed the happiest and most excited of all, darting in and out through the throng, diving frequently. One might have thought that these birds of three different kinds were really members of one great family which now, after a long separation, had found one another again; and I wondered whether they had indeed been friends and companions on some lonely lake in the Far North, where perhaps they had all nested and reared their young, only to be separated by storms and driven far apart during their long southward journey in the fall.

A long while I watched them. It was a pleasant thing to see, this peaceful and happy association of wild water-birds of three species, this feathered convention which had all the appearance of a reunion of old friends. The swallows returned and made another whirlpool of flashing, vivid life above the fleet of coots, ducks, and grebes;

the song sparrows still sang their tinkling melodies; the myrtle warblers talked to one another in the willows; a company of fifteen or twenty doves shot past like feathered projectiles; a long-winged osprey, sailing high above the lake, swung down and circled once or twice before passing on. And, even as I watched, a subtle incantation had been wrought. All the melancholy and ugliness of the little lake had departed; and it was not so much the brighter sunlight that had worked the change as it was the awakening of life, the coming of the birds. It was the magic of life that had transformed the scene, changing the whole atmosphere and aspect of the spot—transmuting melancholy into happiness, drabness into beauty.

A hundred times in a hundred places—no, a thousand times in a thousand places—I have seen this happen. And thousands of others have seen it happen again and again and again. We do not realize what we owe to the lesser forms of life, especially the birds; how they brighten and make beautiful the face of nature. Or, rather, we are just now beginning to realize it vaguely and

are taking the first steps toward repairing, in so far as is possible, the damage we have done in destroying the life around us.

Few know how far-reaching that destruction has been. It is a shocking, almost a terrifying thing to read the toll of man's victims, the list of species that he has utterly destroyed.

The dodo is, perhaps, the most famous instance. When the mate of the ship *Berkeley Castle* made a note in his journal concerning the dodo in 1681, he wrote the final chapter of this strange bird's history. Never after that, so far as is known to science, was the dodo seen alive. At an even earlier date the great flightless rail of Mauritius vanished; while ten years after the last dodo was seen, the tall solitaire of Rodriguez—a creature so beautiful and so graceful that the old traveller Leguat compared it with a beautiful woman—was observed by Europeans for the last time.

In 1803, the black emu of Kangaroo Island, South Australia, was abundant, and in that year a French expedition sent three of the birds home to Paris, where two of them lived in captivity

until 1822. They were the last of their race, for before the death of these captives a squatter settled on Kangaroo Island, the sole domain of the black emu, and when his work of destruction ended, not an emu was left alive. One man had wiped out a species, a whole race of living beings, and in all the museums of the world there are but three stuffed specimens in existence to prove that such a bird as the black emu once lived.

Largest of all the cormorants of the world and, with its strange white-ringed eyes and its brilliant green and purple plumage, perhaps handsomer than any other, Pallas's cormorant was discovered on the islands in Bering Sea in 1741. In a little more than a hundred years the entire species had been completely destroyed, and only four museum skins remain to tell its story. The great white water-hen *Notornis* has vanished: not one living individual remains of the white-winged sandpiper of Tahiti which abounded in Captain Cook's time, of the New Zealand quail, of the beautiful Hollondais pigeon, of the Nestor parrot (last seen in a cage in London in 1851), of the *Athene* owl, of the lovely Mamo of

Hawaii, slaughtered for the sake of its gorgeous black and golden plumes.

These were all foreign species which have been wiped out in recent years. Here in America were others to be added to the list of feathered races wantonly destroyed.

The beautiful pied duck, which nested in thousands along the Labrador coast and ranged in winter as far south as Chesapeake Bay, was seen for the last time, so far as the records show, in 1875, when a specimen was taken near Long Island, New York. The bird had been exterminated in its breeding places by men who gathered the eggs and young, and by the crews of "feather ships" sent out from New England ports to collect feathers and eiderdown. For centuries before the white man came, the great auk, sometimes called the Northern penguin, had bred in its millions on islands off the northern Atlantic coast, ranging—although it could not fly—all up and down the shore line of the continent apparently as far south as Florida; but even before the first white men settled on the adjacent mainland of the continent, other

white men had begun the slaughter of this strange flightless fowl of the sea.

It was, take it all in all, one of the great massacres of history; and so vast were the numbers of the auks that the bloody work continued for nearly three hundred and fifty years. As early as 1496 or 1498, it is said—within half a dozen years of the voyage of Columbus—adventurous mariners from France began fishing on the Newfoundland banks, and landing on the auk islands where the nesting birds swarmed in incredible multitudes, these fishermen killed untold numbers of old and young. There was one island, wrote Anthonie Parkhurst in 1578, “where wee may drive them on a planke into our ship as many as shall lade her,” and nobody knows how many millions of the helpless birds were herded into pens, killed, salted down and sold for food during the next two hundred and fifty years. Later came a demand for their feathers, and in their last place of refuge, Funk Island off the Newfoundland coast, uncounted thousands were killed. Even then their numbers seemed inexhaustible and, besides, nobody cared.

But before 1845 the last great auk had vanished, and though the human race endure a hundred million years, no man will ever see a great auk again.

Probably few game birds have ever existed in vaster numbers than the Eskimo curlew, which bred in the barren grounds of northwestern Canada and wintered in Argentina and Patagonia. Its migrating myriads darkened the sky; its legions were like the legions of the autumn leaves; it could be killed for the markets in millions, and its numbers would never grow less. So men thought—or pretended to think—for years, while thousands of barrels of Eskimo curlews were shipped to the great Eastern centres. To-day, so far as naturalists know, there is not an Eskimo curlew left alive in all the world. Its incalculable cohorts have gone the way of the even mightier hordes of the passenger pigeon which was, not many years ago, perhaps the most abundant species of bird ever known in any country, but which is now utterly extinct.

This is the tale of man's handiwork in the world of birds alone, and the tale as I have told it

here is not complete. Species after species he has annihilated, and there are many others—the great whooping crane and the superb trumpeter swan, for instance—which he has brought so close to extinction that their doom is sealed. We seldom stop to think what this means. No poem, no painting, no work of man's hand or brain is as marvellous a thing as the least of the species of living beings that inhabit the earth. Each one of them is a miracle as far beyond our comprehension as the stars. We cannot make them, we cannot understand how they were made. To destroy one of them, to wipe a whole species out of existence for all eternity, is to do so colossal a thing that the mind falters at the thought. Yet we have done it again and again and again, thoughtlessly, needlessly, wantonly, cruelly; and many of the species that we have destroyed—or are now destroying—were among the noblest and most beautiful in the whole realm of life.

Especially is this true of the birds, at once the loveliest and the most lovable of nature's wild children, and as a group the friendliest and most

helpful to man. Probably the practical or economic argument in favour of protecting birds was never put more concisely than by Ralph Hodgson in a poem of twelve short lines, a poem which should be better known:

I saw with open eyes
Singing birds sweet
Sold in the shops
For the people to eat,
Sold in the shops of
Stupidity Street.

I saw in vision
The worm in the wheat,
And in the shops nothing
For people to eat;
Nothing for sale in
Stupidity Street.

But important as the economic argument is, essential as it is to protect birds because of the practical good they do, there is another argument more potent still. It is one which appeals to the higher and nobler qualities of man's intellect, and most of all to his love for the beautiful in nature; and better even than "Stupidity Street" I like two other lines of the same poet:

One melody, one lustre lost,
One loveliness of Earth at end——

There, in less than a dozen words, is summed up the tragedy, the irreparable loss which we and all the later generations of men sustain when the curtain of eternity is rung down upon some bright and beautiful species of bird, and the last of its lovely race vanishes forever from the world.

I have wandered far from my golden fox of the Adirondack woods and from the little low-land lake where I watched the grebes and coots and swallows at their play. Yet I have not wandered aimlessly. How shall we help to spread the new doctrine of "live and let live" so that no more victims may be added to the long list of beautiful and noble species destroyed forever by the cruelty and folly of mankind? Surely the most important step of all is to make men and women everywhere realize how much pleasure in the highest sense may be gained from knowledge of and association with the wild things of the woods, the fields, and the waters—how much these living, breathing beings of innumerable

sorts and shapes and hues add to the beauty and wonder of the world and to the enjoyment of existence.

This is the task—I had almost said the duty—of those who love nature for its own sake, who are vividly aware of their love for and interest in nature. It is their work to fan into flame the love of nature which is in nearly every man and woman and in every child, although in some men and women it is smothered and nearly dead. And how shall they fan that flame? How otherwise than by telling of the things that they have seen in the world of nature's wild creatures?

They may have nothing new to tell, nothing that is not already known to naturalists, no important contribution to make to the science of natural history. But they may awaken in someone's mind a new interest in that great and wonderful world that is hidden from many of us only because we have never looked for it. Thus they may win another friend for the birds of the air and the furtive people of the wood; and the day may be hastened when man, the wanton destroyer of so many living forms whose presence

upon the earth enhanced its beauty and enlarged the wonder of existence, will be a destroyer no longer but the guardian and protector of this abounding, marvellous earthly life which is, after man himself, the mightiest miracle within the range of human knowledge.

So I have told here of seeing in a golden place in the Northern hills a red fox whose fur was the colour of misty gold; and I have tried to tell how beautiful he was in that beautiful spot and how his coming transformed those seemingly empty woods and made them far more beautiful and more interesting than they had seemed before. And I have told, too, of how a company of birds—most of them common birds, well known to many people—filled with life and with interest a dead and unattractive place, where I spent an afternoon not long ago, and transmuted its drabness into beauty. I have told of these things lamely; but perhaps there will be some to whom the tale will have a meaning.

VI

The Wood Ibis

The Wood Ibis

THERE are many sounds in nature that delight the ear. The songs of birds, without which the green countryside would be almost a dreary place; the shrill, whistling bugle-note of the whitetail deer, uttered only at night and one of the rarest and wildest of all woods sounds; the guttural, mysterious voices of migrating herons floating down through the blackness overhead; the music of the wind in some high, dim, shadowy forest of ancient straight-trunked pines; the thunder-roll of the surf beating upon a lonely shore—all these in their several ways bring pleasure to those whose deepest joy lies in natural things. More inspiring, perhaps, than any of these is another sound, which even the most fortunate of woods-rovers hears but seldom—the sound of a great company of big, beautiful, fantastic birds, surging upward through the eddying air in some remote and lovely place.

One day in June I heard that sound in a place so lovely that I think there can be no lovelier spot anywhere on earth. We were paddling in a small, flat-bottomed punt along the winding water lanes of a certain cypress lagoon where many tall white egrets and many herons of various kinds had their nests. We were bound for an egret city situated in the lagoon's upper reaches; and as always, when I visit that lagoon, the magic of the spot had laid its spell upon me, so that for the time I was scarcely aware of details but was lost and submerged in the beauty of my surroundings.

I was in another world, a flooded forest of some ancient epoch before man was known, a world of water and of trees. On every side the smooth trunks of cypresses rose from the still surface of the lagoon, their vivid green feathery foliage forming a lofty roof above our heads, their branches festooned with long, graceful pendants of Spanish moss. In and out amid the cypress trunks wound the narrow water lane that we were following in our punt; and in all that watery wilderness, that beautiful

hidden lake, which was not so much a lake as it was a forest whose floor was water instead of earth, there was no sound except the sounds of the wild creatures for whom the spot was a sanctuary and a stronghold.

They were, nearly all of them, sounds that were wild rather than musical. Gorgeous orange-gold prothonotary warblers, that had their homes in holes in dead stumps rising from the water, sang to us now and then, their brilliant plumage flashing in the sun. Along the shore of the lagoon orchard orioles sang from time to time, and farther away, in high pine woods beyond, crested flycatchers and red-bellied woodpeckers were calling. But for the most part the bird voices that we heard, as we paddled along our serpentine watery path, were the shrill whistles of ospreys who had built their bulky castles of sticks in cypresses beside our way, and the harsh voices of herons of several kinds—great blue and little blue herons, black-crowned and yellow-crowned night herons.

More than once we heard the raucous cry of a great egret and saw a flash of wide snowy wings

ahead of us as the tall bird took flight at our approach; again and again we heard the high, thin note of wood ducks winging like feathered projectiles in and out amid the tall, straight tree-trunks. But these were all familiar sounds which I had heard many times before in that place and in other places, and they were not sufficient to break the spell of the lagoon or to stir into full wakefulness my senses drugged with the serene and dreamlike beauty of the spot.

The sound that roused me came later, when we were not far from the egret city which was our goal. It was not made by the egrets, however, and I knew at once that they were not responsible for it. It was that sound which I described a moment ago as so inspiring to the lover of wild creatures—the sound of many great wings lifting into flight an army of big birds, wild and strange and fantastically beautiful. All at once, without warning of any kind, that surging sound of mighty pinions filled the air; and in an instant all the other sounds of the lagoon were forgotten and the mental lethargy, which the magic of its loveliness had cast upon

me like a spell, vanished as suddenly as a dream.

For a moment the sound of wings seemed everywhere—behind us, on both sides, ahead, above. It was as though the forest all around us had sprung suddenly to life—as though in every tree of the flooded woods great pinions were beating powerfully. But this illusion lasted only for a moment; almost at once I knew that these wings were just ahead of us and to our right behind a tall screen of cypresses whose trunks stood so close together that there was no passage through them. Past this cypress barricade the water lane wound in a long loop, and the punt shot forward at full speed so that we might swing round the dense barrier of the trees and see the open space beyond.

In less than a minute we gained the edge of the open. All the while, the sound of wings had continued, though in diminishing volume; and before I actually saw them I knew what we were about to see—an army of wood ibises interrupted in their noon siesta and reluctantly taking flight as the most watchful ones among them detected the approach of our punt. All at

once the whole company of them, a hundred and fifty at least, burst upon our vision as we glided onward through the flooded woods; and when we came into view the noise of their wings was redoubled as those that still lingered in the trees where they had all been roosting sprang suddenly into the air.

They were a memorable sight—that army of great birds, sailing and circling over our heads, their long necks and long legs outstretched, their wide black-edged pinions gleaming brilliantly white in the bright sun. Round and round they swept, rising higher and higher above the trees, their wings now flapping powerfully, now rigidly extended, sweeping and swerving in and out in a maze so intricate that collision seemed inevitable. For a little while they seemed to fill the air above the cypress tops, and it was then that the spectacle was most splendid and impressive. But memorable as that moment was, it was not so memorable, I think, as that other moment when suddenly the noise of their broad pinions had quelled all the other sounds of the lagoon.

That was a moment when I listened to the wildest of wild music.

The wood ibis is not uncommon in the region where I live—the Low Country of South Carolina. In fact, in certain parts of the Low Country it may be seen in hundreds from June to October; this past spring I saw wood ibises in April, while a few have even been known to winter here. I have travelled for forty miles or more through salt marshes where ibises were so numerous that there was scarcely a moment when none was in sight; and over large areas of marshland this species, which is generally known hereabouts as the gannet, is one of the most familiar of all the marshland birds. Yet it is a bird that no bird-lover ever ranks among common things no matter how abundant it may be. Its great size, its striking and impressive form, its odd and interesting feeding habits, most of all its stateliness when seen in the air and a certain fantastic quality in its appearance when in flight, due mainly to its long neck and legs and its sharply contrasting white and black plumage—all these

things combine to render it a bird of perennial interest.

To me there is another important element of fascination in the wood ibis—the element of wildness. More vividly than any other bird of the marshes and the lagoons, the ibis recalls the glamorous early days of America when civilization had not yet played havoc with all the larger creatures of the wilderness. There is something of the glamour of those days about all the big birds that still survive. But to my mind, the wood ibis recalls the rich past more strikingly than any other bird that is with us to-day; and doubtless this is due largely to the fact that, although it is less abundant than the herons, the ibis is even more gregarious and is to be seen on the marshes in larger flocks. Hence it makes a more impressive appearance than the herons or any other of the marsh birds and brings back to mind more graphically those vast congregations of wild fowl that were so notable a feature of the early days.

I speak of the wood ibis as a marsh bird, and on this coast it is mainly a bird of the salt

marshes. Yet—although it is not really an ibis at all but a member of the stork family—its name is not wholly misleading. During the breeding season it is an inhabitant of the woods, nesting in large colonies in densely wooded swamps; and at all seasons it resorts to the woods from time to time, especially in order to rest or doze after feeding abundantly on the marshes and tidal flats. Thus in this region it is often to be seen in flocks on the secluded cypress lagoons hidden deep in the woods; and amid those beautiful surroundings it is seen perhaps to best advantage and stirs the imagination even more deeply than on the open marshes because it contributes to the scene just the wild and fantastic touch that is needed to make the picture perfect.

Abundant as the wood ibis is here in the Carolina Low Country during almost half of the year, it has not been known to breed regularly in this region. Until this spring (1928) when a breeding colony was discovered at Penny Dam in Christ Church Parish by my friends, Alexander Sprunt and Burnham Chamberlain, there was

only one record of its nesting, when on June 1, 1885, Arthur T. Wayne found a breeding colony in Caw-Caw Swamp. It seems probable that most of the ibises frequenting this district in summer come up from farther South after the breeding season is over. Many of them appear to be young birds; but whether young or old, they are nearly always wary and shy, so that, in spite of their abundance, their habits are little known even to woodsmen and boatmen who spend much of their time in the swamps and on the marshes.

Nearly always you will see the wood ibis flying high in the air, or resting in compact flocks on the marshes or tidal flats, or roosting in the woods of the barrier islands or of the cypress lagoons on the mainland. You will seldom, unless you are extraordinarily fortunate, see ibises feeding near at hand. In feeding, the flocks often scatter, the birds going singly or in couples to their favourite feeding places in the marsh creeks or the fresh-water lagoons. Into the deep tidal creeks winding everywhere through the marshes empty innumerable lesser creeks or

gullies, full of water when the tide is at the flood, but dry or almost dry at the ebb. In these small, muddy, winding marsh brooks the wood ibis finds an inexhaustible supply of mullet and shrimp, and it is there that he feeds when the tide is running out and the water is shallow enough for the tall bird to take his stand in the midst of the stream.

Sometimes he will stand motionless, his long, heavy, curved bill partly submerged, the mandibles gaping slightly, until suddenly his bill snaps shut and he lifts out a fish. Sometimes he scratches about with his feet apparently to muddy the water and force the fish to the surface to be seized instantly and quickly devoured. But it is only by good luck or very careful stalking that you will get close to him at such a time. He is a wary feeder, constantly on the watch for enemies; and as a rule the marsh brooks in which he feeds, hidden by the tall marsh grass lining the high banks, are too narrow and shallow for navigation at low tide, while to approach him overland across the boggy surface of the marsh is nearly always impossible.

Only in the deep woods of some fresh-water lagoon to which the ibises resort when the tides have covered the marshes may you hope to approach so close to them as to hear the wild music of their pinions as the whole great company take flight. Very rarely on the marshes, where cover is lacking, you may enjoy a similar experience; I remember a summer day a few years ago when we ran almost into a flock of fifty-two wood ibises resting beside a marsh creek at a point where the marsh grass hid our approaching boat from view. Suddenly, as if by magic, the marsh ahead of us sprang to life as the big birds heaved upward, long necks outstretched, long legs dangling, pinions desperately beating the air. We heard the swish and surge of wild wings then; but it was only by luck that we caught those marshland ibises napping, and such fortunate chances are rare.

There is another rare sight that you may sometimes enjoy in wood-ibis country—one that I enjoyed that same June morning when on the loveliest of the swamp lagoons we startled the ibises from their roosting place amid the cy-

presses and heard the thrilling music of their pinions. For some time after they had taken flight they continued to drift about in the air as though reluctant to leave the place; and for many minutes we sat idly in the punt watching the great birds circle and soar high above us, alternately flapping their wings and sailing, while above them two aningas circled, and below them blue herons and white egrets passed to and from the egret city farther up the lagoon.

Suddenly, very high in the air, higher even than the two aningas, a soaring ibis caught my eye. He was sailing on motionless wings, his long legs dangling almost straight beneath him; and all at once, as I watched him, he began to rock violently from side to side in the air. First to the right and then to the left the big bird swung his body, slanting so far over that first one wing and then the other pointed almost directly downward. The rocking movement was not only exceedingly violent but also very swift; and it continued until the bird, sailing straight onward all the while, passed out of sight behind the tops of some tall trees.

It was a performance grotesque rather than beautiful; for while the wood ibis is a beautiful sight when seen sailing on extended pinions far up against the blue, its beauty lies mainly in its stateliness, and this, of course, vanishes when the big bird seems to go suddenly crazy and begins to cut capers in the high air. Yet that mad aërial dance, a spectacle not often witnessed even in this region where the ibis is a fairly familiar object in the summer sky, was a sight that I would not have missed for worlds.

VII

Our National Bird

Our National Bird

THE shallow waters of the river flats were packed and crammed with life. From farther South, regiment after regiment of wild ducks had come in: big, burly-bodied mallards, compact, keen-winged teal, slim, graceful pintails, already beginning by easy stages their long journey to the far northern breeding grounds. The sunlight, striking downward through the morning mists, glittered on a thousand iridescent green heads, illumined the snowy breasts and necks of the pintail squadrons, lit the white cheek crescents of the blue-winged teal. More numerous even than the ducks, a multitude of coots moved here and there along the reedy margins, their blue-black heads bobbing awkwardly as they swam, their white bills gleaming like polished nickel.

A half mile upstream the river swung to the west in a sharp curve, and there a long, narrow

peninsula, densely wooded with tall pines, thrust outward like a lofty promontory halfway across the flats. Suddenly, from behind this promontory, a dark shape sailed into view—a great white-headed eagle, planing on motionless pinions some sixty feet above the surface of the water.

For half a minute nothing happened. Then swiftly the panorama was transformed. The life that crowded the flooded flats, the feathered fleets that had been floating idly there, awoke to instant activity. Near the pine promontory the surface of the lagoon heaved upward, while at the same moment a surging, rushing sound filled the air. Directly in front of the eagle a flock of mallards had risen with a drumming thunder of pinions; and that thunder was a signal to all the vari-coloured multitude thronging that watery world.

Squadron after squadron, regiment after regiment, the wild duck armies lifted from the surface. The air shook with the swelling roar of their wings, with the palpitant clamour of companies of coots scurrying madly across the

water. Swiftly the teeming flats were emptying themselves of life. In a tumult of whirring wings and a turmoil of pattering, splashing feet, the legions of the waterfowl were fleeing before their master and sovereign.

I do not know whether the heart of the oncoming eagle swelled with pride and exultation at that moment, but I know that mine always beats faster when I see a sight like the one that I have attempted to describe. One does not often see that sight under conditions so favourable, but, once seen, it will never be forgotten. There is something superb and glorious in the spectacle of the king of birds thus manifesting his sovereignty, something that lifts the eagle above all other birds and invests him with an incomparable majesty. It is the majesty of acknowledged supremacy; of strength and speed, of perfectly proportioned beauty, of physical perfection in one of its most admirable forms. At such a time the eagle appears as the monarch that he is, the king of all his kind, the irresistible Lord of the Air; and that drumming thunder of wings that rolls before him down the flats as the

wild duck regiments take flight at his approach is his vassals' tribute to his power.

He is a king in truth, this snowy-headed ruler of the sky-spaces; a king in that older and better sense in which kingliness meant strength, courage, nobility of bearing. Broad-shouldered, compact, powerfully muscled, massive yet clean of build, he is the peer in stalwart beauty of any of his royal race. His trenchant talons, his great hooked beak are weapons of deadly power. His wide dark pinions, of ample spread, can drive him at impressive speed through the air or lift him high above the earth to dizzy altitudes. At rest or on the wing, in repose or in action, he is a worthy member of that storied race of birds which, in all ages and in many countries, has stirred more deeply than any other the imagination of mankind.

From the earliest times, the eagle, in one form or another—there are many species scattered over almost the whole world—has played an important part not only in the literature but also in the history of nations. His great size, his swiftness and strength, his noble and fearless

aspect, the majesty of his flight when sweeping onward across the heavens, and the splendid and terrible power of his onset—all these things, appealing equally to the poet and the soldier, distinguished him among all the other inhabitants of the air and revealed him, through a mist of legend which magnified his powers, as the very type of invincible valour, the incarnation of all the most admired attributes of the warrior.

Thus, by a natural process, the eagle became a symbol, even a deity of war. The Persians bore him forward into battle upon their spears; he was the emblem of the kings of Babylon and of ancient Egypt; the Romans hailed him not only as the Bird of Jove but also as the Bird of Rome, and the sight of him in the sky on the eve of conflict was almost an assurance of triumph. Marius declared him exclusively the standard of the Roman legion; no lesser unit of the Roman army was deemed worthy of the imperial bird. Charlemagne, combining under his rule the Latin and German empires, adopted the double-headed eagle as the fitting emblem of

his sovereignty; and in diverse forms and under many banners the eagles of Rome and of Charlemagne have flown in the dust of countless battlefields through all the centuries that have followed. To the armies of Prussia, of Czarist Russia, of Hapsburg Austria, and of Napoleonic France the eagle was the bird of war, the personification of all the virile virtues of the soldier, the perfect symbol of victory.

All this—exaggerated and half-mythical though it may be—is part of the eagle as we see him to-day in life; and all this, all that he has symbolized in the rise and fall of empires, in the crash of contending armies, in “dust of battle and deaths of kings,” is one reason why it is difficult to write about the bird himself, the eagle of flesh and blood, without in some measure glorifying him. The eagle, “soaring above earth’s clouds and seeking the sun in the heavens,” has become a legend, an image in the mind. He belongs as much to literature as to natural history, and we never see him without being affected, unconsciously perhaps, by the glamour that tradition has spread round

him. It would be a pity if this were not so—if, for instance, we were all as practical as Benjamin Franklin when he protested against the choice of the bald eagle as the emblem of the United States; for however industriously his detractors may proceed to reveal and then to overemphasize his shortcomings, the poets have painted a truer picture of the eagle than those painfully scientific persons whose only interest lies in pointing out the details in which he fails to satisfy the ideal conception that tradition has given us.

There is no spectacle in the whole world of birds so inspiring as the soaring eagle floating on outstretched wings in “those blue tracts above the thunder” which are his true home and kingdom. Something of the grandeur of that spectacle is due to association, to the great part which the eagle has played in history, and to the almost supernatural powers attributed to him in legend and myth. But it is not wholly this aura of tradition that invests the eagle, whenever seen, with an interest more compelling and more nearly universal than that inspired by any other feathered creature. He is in his own right a bird

of unsurpassed power and majesty, the finest and strongest of the great order of martial birds, the *Raptores* or birds of prey, which include in their number the swiftest and most formidable of the denizens of the air.

The eagle is among birds what the lion is among beasts; and in many ways his appeal to the imagination is even stronger than that of the lion, due largely to his habit of soaring to magnificent heights, to his superb and commanding aspect when standing at rest, and to the spectacular and imposing nature of his aërial evolutions when seeking and pursuing his prey. Hudson in a memorable passage tells how the larger hawks, no longer abundant in England, sailing "on high in placid flight, circling and ascending . . . completed and intensified the effect of Nature's wildness and majesty." This is doubly true of the eagle, the king of all the hawks, greater than they as the lion is greater than the leopard and the panther; while the eagle in the full sweep of his splendid powers, pursuing the osprey and exacting tribute from him in the high air, stirs all those primitive

emotions in us which exalt strength and swift-ness and physical perfection.

As for the "morals" of it, which so gravely disturbed the worthy Dr. Franklin, we need not let that question upset us seriously, remembering that the laws which Nature has made for her wild children are not the laws which man has made for his own kind. It is neither necessary nor just, and it is nearly always fatal, to apply human standards of ethics and behaviour to the lower animals. It is better by far, and in reality vastly more philosophical, to note the fact that the osprey in these encounters suffers no harm except the loss of his booty, and, for the rest, to accept the eagle as he is—the imperious King of the Air, ably and boldly exercising the prerogatives which Nature has conferred upon those to whom she has granted kingship and rejoicing with her in the swiftness and strength in which she glories. Here, too, the poets have come nearer the heart of things than some philosophers and some naturalists who could not see the eagle's splendour because they were too conscious of his faults. Even the gentlest of poets, Wordsworth,

could find a deep delight in the spectacle of the eagle's power:

The last I saw
Was on the wing; stooping, he struck with awe
Man, bird and beast; then, with a consort paired,
From a bold headland, their loved aerie's guard,
Flew high above Atlantic waves to draw
Light from the fountain of the setting sun.

The last I saw (on Edisto Island on the South Carolina coast) was also on the wing. From behind a dense pine wood a bald eagle appeared and flew directly over us at a height of not more than two hundred feet, hurrying westward with swift, strong strokes of his pinions. He was still in plain sight when another and larger eagle, evidently a female, appeared from behind the same pine wood at a greater height in the air; and a few moments later, following in the wake of this second bird, a third eagle sailed into view. Almost directly over us, this third bird, which was undoubtedly a male, overtook the second: she wheeled in the air and swooped to meet him, while he swerved and swung sharply round to follow her, his white tail spread like a

fan, his head and outstretched neck gleaming like sunlit snow. But she was no longer fleeing from him; she was waiting for him now, her mighty wings beating rapidly, holding her almost motionless—yet, when he was almost upon her, again she fled, to be overtaken almost instantly.

It was late October, the eagles' season of love. This that we were witnessing was the courtship of the royal birds, the fierce love-making of the monarchs of the air. It was not quite as Whitman describes it in "The Dalliance of The Eagles":

The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gy-
rating wheel,
Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight
grappling,
In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight down-
ward falling . . .

The "rushing amorous contact" was not so close as in the poem; the two big birds did not clinch or grapple or fall downward, nor have I ever known this to happen on the other occasions when I have seen eagles engaged in their aërial love-

making. They pursued each other in swift, erratic, zigzag flight, swooping and darting, their great wings often touching or almost touching, their wild, fierce laughter—"Cac-cac-cac" or "Kek-kek-kek"—floating down to us as we watched.

Perhaps before they came into view there had been a battle among the clouds. Perhaps the first eagle that we saw, the one that had appeared first from behind the pine wood and had flown on to the west without turning, had fought with the other male and had been beaten. He was forgotten now; these two had the sky to themselves. In a few minutes, still pursuing each other swiftly, still darting and swerving from side to side, they passed out of sight beyond the wood whence they had come. But those few minutes were memorable—the great birds dark against the blue October heavens, their white heads and tails shining in the bright sun, their mighty sombre wings lashing the air, driving them onward in swift flight or in swifter pursuit, all the passion of their fierce desire blazing there in the face of the sky, each wholly intent upon

the other, each heedless of all else in the whole universe except the splendid snowy-headed being that was the one thing worth possessing in all the world.

To see this fine sight—the love-making of eagles in the high air—more than once or twice in a lifetime, one must live in or travel to some region where eagles are fairly abundant. It is a spectacle not often to be witnessed to-day in most parts of the United States. In North America two species of eagle are known. Possibly in the old days the terrible harpy eagle of South America and Mexico, the “winged wolf” of the Aztecs, strayed north occasionally to the lower Rio Grande valley in Texas, and probably the gray sea eagle or *erne* sometimes visits the ice-bound northern shores of the continent. But the only eagles that breed in this country and are fairly familiar to Americans are the golden eagle, a dark-brown bird with a sprinkling of lighter brown feathers on its head and nape; and the white-headed or American eagle, commonly called the bald eagle—though it is not bald—averaging a little larger than the golden

eagle and, in the adult plumage, a handsomer, more striking bird because of its white head, neck, and tail, which stand out in sharp contrast with its sombre body and wings.

Of these two, the bald eagle—the true American eagle—is the better known and the more abundant. The golden eagle has a more extensive range, being found not only in North America but throughout the northern half of the northern hemisphere; but in this country the golden eagle is now confined mainly to the mountainous regions of the West, though a few may still nest in the wilder and more rugged parts of the Appalachians. The bald eagle, on the other hand, exists practically throughout the United States and nests in suitable localities throughout that vast area.

Any American, no matter in what part of the United States he lives, may hope to see the bald eagle if he has an eye for the birds of the air. One reason why so few of us ever see the Bird of Freedom in a wild state (in a cage, where his spirit is broken, he is hardly worth seeing) lies in the fact that not many of us can devote much

time to watching the highway of the sky. But while every American may hope to see the American eagle, in most parts of the country that hope is likely to be gratified only at the cost of long and patient watching. Due largely to the failure of the American people to give him the protection he should have, over most of his habitat the great bird is not now as abundant as he once was.

There are regions, however, generally close to the sea, where he is still a familiar sight, and one of the things I am thankful for is the fact that I live in one such region. Here, among the islands of the South Carolina coast and in the wide tracts of forest and swamp along the many rivers that come down across the Carolina Low Country to the sea, the bald eagle still holds his own. I know of at least two aeries within half-an-hour's drive of my home in Charleston; again and again I have looked up and have seen the king of birds soaring above my garden in the city; at any season except late spring and summer I can look forward with considerable hopefulness to seeing the white-crowned monarch of the sky on nearly

every trip that I make in the wilder parts of the surrounding country.

At rest, the eagle is unmistakable. You may know the eagle in flight by his great size (from wing-tip to wing-tip he may spread seven feet), by the flatness of his wings and their width near the tips, and by the shape of his head, which appears much longer than that of a hawk or vulture, due largely to the fact that his strong hooked beak is longer than that of most birds of prey. If the head, neck, and tail of this eagle are white, you may know beyond all doubt that it is the bald or American eagle. If, however, the whole bird is of a more or less uniform dark colour, the identification is not so simple. In that case the bird may be either an adult golden eagle which has passed beyond the immature ring-tailed stage or a young bald eagle.

The bald eagle requires at least three years for the acquirement of the white head and tail which characterize the adult bird, and in the meantime its dark brownish or grayish plumage, often appearing mottled or marbled when viewed from directly beneath, closely resembles at a distance

that of the golden eagle. Very close at hand, you can distinguish the bald eagle in any plumage from the golden eagle by the fact that the former's legs (*tarsi*) are bare of feathers, while the golden eagle's legs are booted right down to the toes; but since eagles in flight carry their legs close up against their bodies, this is a field mark of little value in the field. So rare is the golden eagle, however, except in the mountainous parts of the West, that most Americans who see an eagle, no matter what the colour of its plumage, may be fairly sure that it is the bald eagle, the Bird of America, the symbol of American sovereignty and freedom.

To every American, one would suppose, that sight should bring a thrill of patriotic pride; to too many it seems to bring nothing except an impulse to destroy. We are proud of the eagle on our national crest, and we are supposed to love the Bird of Freedom that typifies the strength and independence of America. But it is a queer sort of love.

For when we see the American eagle in life, standing aloof and watchful on some lofty van-

tage point or sailing on wide motionless pinions through the air, too often the gun leaps to the shoulder, and the great bird comes whirling down, a blood-spattered mass of carrion.

Why? The answer is simple.

The eagle is a big bird, a very big bird, and we shoot all very big birds that come our way. Moreover, he is, in most parts of the country, something of a rarity, and it is considered quite a feat to kill and bring home so huge and strange a creature. Everybody is interested and scores of people crowd around the carcass and marvel at the vast spread of wing and the long, sharp claws. We are pointed out as the mighty Nimrod who did the deed. We puff out our chest; and great is our pride when we read a story in the paper next day that Mr. So-and-So, one of the most enthusiastic of local sportsmen, killed an eagle measuring seven feet from tip to tip, and how the great bird, the first one seen in that region in years, created a sensation when its body was exhibited at Jones and Brown's store.

It is time for that sort of thing to stop, and it is

time for thoughtful Americans to put a stop to it.

There are many reasons why it should be stopped—why even those who are not especially interested in birds or in the conservation of wild life should help make an end to the irregular but destructive warfare waged against the bald eagle in many parts of the United States. Most important of all is what we must term, for want of a better word, the æsthetic reason. Into this it is not necessary to enter; nor is it necessary to point out the illogical character of a state of mind which glorifies the effigy of the eagle above the Stars and Stripes and condones the slaughter of the real eagle in the field. It is more to the point, perhaps, to review the practical considerations which affect the relation of the bald eagle to us in everyday life—in other words, his economic status.

There is no good reason why we should not protect him. Unlike the golden eagle, which in some parts of the country is a serious menace to young stock, the bald eagle does almost no

injury to man. Always most abundant about bodies of water, he subsists mainly upon fish comparatively seldom used for human consumption. In a few restricted regions he has been known to prey occasionally upon lambs and pigs, and in winter he kills a certain number of water-fowl such as wild ducks and coots, though his depredations of this sort are seldom sufficient to be regarded as important. It is true also that in farming districts he takes an occasional chicken and carries it away to his aerie to feed his young. In Alaska, where the bald eagle is exceedingly abundant, he is said to prey upon the salmon to an extent which provides at least an excuse for the systematic warfare conducted against him there. But, allowing all this, and admitting his slight importance as a destroyer of rodents inimical to the farmer, the fact remains that in the United States the bald eagle does so little harm that it is not worthy of a moment's consideration in comparison with the great bird's æsthetic value and with the service which he can perform, and has performed, as an inspiration to American patriotism.

It was, as already remarked, Benjamin Franklin, generally a model of common sense, who first criticized, largely on moral grounds, the selection of the bald eagle as our national bird, declaring that the turkey would have been a more appropriate emblem.

If Franklin could picture a strutting gobbler inspiring American youth to deeds of heroism as it perched above the flag, he had a livelier imagination than most of us. The truth is, of course, that the eagle as an emblem, the eagle in his appeal to the finer faculties of the mind, soars far above biological actuality, lifted on high by a mightier power than that of his own great wings—the immeasurable glamour of all that he has symbolized in the legend, the history, the poetry of the past. As for the moral character of the living bird (if there is such a thing among the lower animals) it is true, of course, that the bald eagle often deprives the osprey or fish hawk of his booty; but throughout the whole realm of nature it is ordained that the reward of strength shall be mastery, and the bald eagle, like all of nature's wild things, lives and must live in accord

with nature's law. And when Franklin called the bald eagle a coward because he had seen the tiny kingbird attack the eagle with impunity, he had evidently forgotten what the average man is likely to do when he is attacked by a wasp or hornet.

The eagle, like all the other big birds of prey, is often annoyed by crows and by smaller birds of various kinds which know that they are comparatively safe because of their small size and superior agility. Frequently, on such occasions, the eagle will rid himself of his tormenters by leaving his perch and flying away; but to call him a coward on that account is no more logical than to declare that a man who runs away from an angry wasp is a coward. The eagle is not the utterly fearless creature that legend pictures. If he were, he would long ago have ceased to exist. He has intelligence as well as his due share of courage, and he knows when he is hopelessly overmatched. Above all, he knows that man is an enemy against whom he cannot prevail. That is why in many instances he allows his nest to be robbed without attacking the intruder. There

have been, on the other hand, more than a few cases in which bald eagles have defended their nest and young with dauntless bravery, while a wounded eagle, wing-broken and brought to bay upon the ground, will fight to the last with furious resolution against odds which might well chill the spirit of the bravest man.

Among the poets, perhaps none has expressed the eagle more admirably than Tennyson in a famous "fragment" often quoted and never to be forgotten:

He clasps the crag with hookèd hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

That is the eagle not only of legend but of reality, an accurate and inspiring picture. In the legendary lore, however, which has grown up about the king of birds, imagination has played a certain part.

Probably even in legend his marvellous power

of vision has not been exaggerated. Those fierce and haughty eyes, gleaming so sternly under their overhanging brows, are in truth as keen as they look and are able to pick out small objects at incredible distances; but whether it is true, as the ancients believed, that the eagle alone among mortal creatures is able to gaze directly at the noonday sun is a question which science has not yet determined. In one respect legend has magnified the eagle's powers in a way that has done him serious injury. There is no known basis for the widespread myth, quite generally believed, about the eagle's habit of carrying off small children. It is perfectly safe to say that all the stories of American eagles kidnapping babies are products of the imagination.

Aside from legend, there are various popular misconceptions about eagles in general and about the bald or American eagle in particular. It will be surprising to most people, perhaps, to learn that the female eagle is always larger than the male, this being the general rule among birds of prey. Even more surprising is the fact that the largest American eagles are not the white-

headed, white-tailed adults but immature birds in the more or less uniform dark-brown or dark-gray plumage worn before the white plumage of head and tail is acquired. Nor does the American eagle commonly nest on crags, as is generally supposed, though in craggy regions beside the sea he may use a high cliff as a lookout point.

His home, in some lofty tree-top, is a castle indeed. It is built of sticks, some of them five feet or more in length and almost as thick as a man's wrist, sods, weeds, grass, moss, bark, pine-tops, stalks, and branches of various kinds. The eagles, which are believed to be mated for life and which probably live to a great age if no accident befalls them, return to the same nest year after year, adding new material to the structure each season, so that ultimately it attains an immense size. Nests six or seven feet in height and six feet wide are not uncommon, and there is a record of one nest, occupied for at least thirty-four years, which is twelve feet tall and eight and a half feet wide across the top. In a shallow depression at the top of the nest the female deposits two, occasionally three, great white eggs; and

when the eaglets make their appearance, both parent birds work diligently and faithfully to satisfy the voracious appetites of their offspring.

This chapter, intended to be principally a personal record, an account of certain incidents in which eagles have figured, has become largely a bird's-eye view of the general natural history of the eagle; and since the great bird, in spite of his fame, is little known to most people, perhaps this quick and partial survey of his habits and characteristics is not out of place here. It may serve to open the way to a better acquaintance with one of the finest forms of American wild life, and it may help to impress upon some who chance to read it the desirability of making the American eagle in fact as well as in theory our national bird, a bird to be fostered and guarded.

For all lovers of the outdoors, to whom Nature's wildness is perhaps her most alluring charm, no such plea is necessary. To them the sight of an eagle in the sky is ample reward for many days of seeking; and when it happens to them, as it has happened to me this fall, that day after day and week after week the king of birds has a

place in the panorama of wild life witnessed on trips afield, they know that they are living through days that will not be forgotten.

The most unusual spectacle, seen this past autumn, in which eagles have figured has already been described—the love-making of the royal birds in the air above Edisto Island on the South Carolina coast. There are other incidents that stand out, vivid mind-pictures long to be retained in memory; and the sum of them all is an impression, a recollection, of beauty and of wildness which fills the mind with wonder and in which the splendour and the majesty of eagles is a commanding element.

Days of blue skies and of widespread golden marshlands, of blue sea and white surf and gray-gold, palm-fringed beaches lying lonely in the sun: blue and white and golden days in a lovely and dearly loved region beside the sea: and floating under the blue sky, sailing in wide circles on outstretched motionless wings, a splendid white-crowned monarch, taking his ease in those lofty solitudes where he reigns unchallenged and supreme.

There have been days when all the air was full of life. Buzzard and heron and hawk I have seen soaring under him; and once, while I watched him sailing on high, three stately wood ibises passed near him across the heavens, their long necks outstretched, their long legs trailing, their white black-edged pinions gleaming in the brilliant sun. But all these, fine as they were, were inferior to the King.

Often his mate has been with him. Often, as we stood in the breakers fishing for surf bass, we looked up and saw the two eagles high above us like airplanes against the blue. Once, while I watched them thus, one eagle—I think the male—climbed in wide spirals without a discernible movement of his wings until he was far above his circling mate; then, tipping suddenly forward, he came down headforemost, diving straight for her, a mighty spearhead plunging from the sky, his body rocking violently from side to side. Just over her, his broad pinions widened and flattened, his white tail opened like a fan—and when in another fraction of a second he would have crashed into her, he shot upward in a long

curve, having passed so close to her that she must have felt the wind of his rushing wings.

There was one day when I saw eagle matched against eagle not in battle but in a contest only less stirring than actual battle would have been. Far away across the marshlands I saw an eagle hurrying toward the sea. He was flying at high speed, his dark wings powerfully beating the air; and, in a few moments, I saw behind him another eagle also rushing at utmost speed toward the ocean. I looked seaward in the direction in which the two great white-headed birds were flying, but I could distinguish nothing there; yet I judged from the manner and the velocity of their flight that their keen eyes saw what I did not or could not see.

The leading eagle, which was some hundreds of yards ahead of the other, crossed the narrow strip of beach between the marshes and the ocean, heading straight out over the Atlantic; then, suddenly, I saw in front of him, well out over the water, an osprey circling and spiralling upward. At that distance I could not discern the fish in the osprey's claws, but I knew that it was there

—that this was the prize which had brought the two monarchs hurrying across the marshlands from their lookout stations perhaps a mile or several miles away.

I knew what would happen, for I had seen it often before; but this time the sequel was a surprise. The osprey, a large and strong-winged hawk, often fights hard to keep his fish, circling upward, dodging and twisting, refusing to surrender until his last chance of escape has gone. This osprey, however, gave up quickly. At the first swoop of the eagle the sea hawk dropped his fish, and the larger bird, shooting downward with half-closed wings, seized it in his talons before it struck the surface of the water.

He did not keep it long. The other eagle, arriving at this moment upon the scene, drove at him with furious speed, and for a few minutes I saw a thrilling contest in the air above the ocean—the two great birds swooping and swerving, dodging and twisting this way and that, the one trying to escape, the other and apparently more powerful bird cutting it off at every turn. If these eagles were mates, perhaps the male had taken

the fish from the osprey only to give it to his consort: in that case, this mad chase above the ocean was only a game—a phase, perhaps, of the eagles' autumnal love-making. But to my eyes it had all the appearance of deadly earnestness, and, in any case, it was, while it lasted, perhaps the finest display of the sort that I have witnessed. It was too furious to last long. Presently the first eagle released the fish, and the other, with a magnificent downward gliding swoop, caught it in her talons and bore it off through the air.

That was a fine, wild, stirring sight, and one not often seen. Yet I think that, of all the pictures of eagles printed upon my memory during those blue and white and golden autumn days at Edisto, the one that I shall remember longest was a picture of another kind.

I was looking across a belt of marshland toward the strip of beach and the ocean beyond when I saw an eagle hovering above the waves perhaps a hundred yards beyond the outermost billows of the surf. Almost at once this eagle was joined by another; and for a long while, perhaps a quarter of an hour, the two big birds, both of

them adults with white heads and tails, were engaged with something, invisible to me, on or near the surface of the water, which completely absorbed their attention.

They were fishing, I concluded, after I had watched them for some time. Probably a school of small fish, menhaden perhaps, was moving near the surface, or possibly something was floating there that might serve the eagles as food. They circled back and forth low above the water, or hung just over it with slowly beating wings, now and again swooping down to it, not with the speed of the osprey but with a statelier gliding motion, never plunging beneath the surface, as the osprey often does, but evidently striking at their prey with their claws. Whatever it was that they sought, it was not easily secured; and I was glad of this, for, although there was nothing especially dramatic in the spectacle, it was to me a scene of extraordinary interest and beauty, and I would not willingly have lost a minute of it.

It was afternoon, and there was something, some power or quality, in the slanting rays of the sun that deepened and intensified all the rich

colours of land and sea. The marsh over which I gazed was a glorious bronze-gold and the sea beyond was a deep, intense blue; yet at the same time, by that magic of the late light, all bright colours seemed to be made brighter, so that the white parallel lines of the surf were a most brilliant white against the blue of the water and the white heads and tails of the eagles shone with the glittering whiteness of snow.

As they hovered just above the surface, their snowy tails spread wide, their white heads and necks bent downward, the light seemed to shine through them, and their broad wings appeared no longer dark brown or black but a lighter, almost translucent brown tinged with gold. Viewed thus, they lacked the stateliness of the eagle on high, the majesty of the eagle in swift pursuit across the heavens. Yet there was a beauty in them that was royal and splendid; and those two eagles, lit by the sun and poised above the blue water, seemed to me then, and seem to me still, one of the finest pictures of wild life that I have ever seen.

VIII

Our Other National Bird

Our Other National Bird

WHEN Charles the Ninth of France sat down at his wedding banquet in the year 1570, he was probably entirely unaware that something was about to happen to him which had never happened to any other king of France. Perhaps his mother, Catherine of Medici, had knowledge of what was coming, for Catherine was a managing sort of woman and kept a watchful eye on everything that was done or planned in the royal palace. But chefs are an independent tribe, intolerant of interference with their affairs, and possibly only the palace chef and his underlings knew that a rare distinction was about to be conferred upon their exalted master.

History is silent as to these details. The important fact—vouched for by Charles Lucian Bonaparte, the French naturalist—is that Charles the Ninth at his wedding banquet consumed, doubtless with great gusto, liberal por-

tions of a strange new fowl never before eaten in France—a large and extraordinary and very delicious bird known as a “Cock of the Indies.”

Thereby Charles the Ninth of France established a precedent. That “Cock of the Indies” was, as a matter of fact, a turkey. No other French king, probably no other European king, had ever dined on turkey, and certainly no African or Asiatic potentate had enjoyed that experience. Hence Charles the Ninth’s wedding banquet may be set down as one of the turning points of history. Then and there the turkey came into his own as the king of all table birds, fit provender for monarchs and for presidents.

He is not only the king of table birds. He is also, in his wild state, the king of game birds, certainly the noblest game bird of the Western Hemisphere and probably unexcelled anywhere on this planet. To the naturalist and nature-lover, too, the turkey is the feathered monarch of the woods, just as the eagle is the winged lord of the air. He is one of the wildest and in many ways one of the wisest of all woods creatures, and a glimpse of him in his wilderness haunts is an

event never to be forgotten. I have seen him many times in the woods, for I am fortunate enough to live in a region where the wild turkey still exists in considerable numbers; but I have never yet seen him without experiencing that thrill of delight which only the wildest of wild things can impart. And so it will be until my woods-roaming days are over.

The man who knows only the domestic turkey, and who has seen that pompous and rather foolish swaggerer often in the barnyard, may find it a little difficult to understand why the sight of a turkey in the woods always and invariably makes a red-letter day. As a matter of fact, the tame turkey of our barnyard and the wild turkey of our woods are two entirely different birds, differing not only in plumage (though in this respect the difference is slight) but also in form, in bearing, in mentality, and in personality.

In the wild gobbler, for all his size and weight, there is something of a gamecock's slimness. His form is powerful and stalwart, yet beautifully moulded. His bearing is proud and confident; yet one sees in him always a hair-trigger alertness

which accentuates his wildness; and somehow that wildness is apparent in every line and curve of his body, in the poise of his head, in the glance of his eye, in the springiness of his stride. His rich coppery-bronze plumage glows and glints in the sun and in certain lights gleams like burnished gold; and when he is on guard (and it is no easy matter to catch a wild gobbler napping), he holds himself splendidly erect so that his tall form seems amazingly tall and that clean thoroughbred slimness which distinguishes him delights the eye of the beholder. There have been times when, fresh from a meeting in the woods with some superb bronze monarch of the sunlit glades, I have almost been ready to agree with old Ben Franklin that the wild turkey and not the bald eagle should have been chosen as our national symbol.

Almost, but not quite; for the wild turkey, with all his stalwart grace and stateliness and pride of bearing, cannot compete with the eagle in those supreme attributes which render the "Bird of Jove" the most impressive of all the denizens of the air. The turkey's name is against



WILD TURKEYS

him, too. It lacks both majesty and beauty, and to many people it implies, naturally enough, a Moslem origin. Moreover, familiarity too often breeds contempt, and though the wild turkey is as far superior to the domestic turkey as a gamecock is to a dominicker rooster, it is the barnyard bird that generally comes to mind when the turkey is mentioned. The turkey, whether wild or domestic, belongs not with the martial birds but with the game birds, a much less dashing and aggressive group than the eagles and falcons; and though he is fairly strong and swift on the wing for short distances, his power of flight is as nothing compared with that of the great eagle family. As for physical prowess, the largest turkey gobbler, though far outweighing the largest eagle, would have no chance in a combat with the latter bird. Not many miles from where this is being written such a combat once took place, though the eagle in this instance was not the bald eagle, our national bird, but a golden eagle. The turkey was already dead and the eagle was feasting on its body when a gunner shot the victor.

Nevertheless, though it is fortunate that Franklin did not have his way, the wild turkey might be regarded as, in some respects at any rate, a logical second choice for the symbol of the United States; and lumping the wild and the domestic forms together for the moment, the popularity of the turkey as a table delicacy in America and the prominence which it assumes at Thanksgiving and Christmas might well entitle it to be called "Our Other National Bird." Hence the history and natural history of the turkey constitute a subject of particular interest, especially in view of the fact that most Americans know very little about this bird which plays a gala part in our gastronomic lives.

Perhaps the most widespread error concerning the bird is the vague idea shared by thousands of people that the turkey came originally from Turkey. This is an utterly false notion. The turkeys are a distinctively New World family and were entirely unknown until the first explorers crossed the Atlantic. Possibly the turkey owes its misleading name to the habit once prevalent in England of calling every strange and foreign

object Turk, Indian, and so forth; possibly confusion with the guinea fowl, to which bird the name "turkey" was at first applied, is responsible; or possibly the English of those times saw in the headgear of the gobbler a resemblance to the headgear worn by the Turks. No one really knows how the name originated and most of the suggestions which have been offered are guesswork.

Another common error is the notion that the tame turkey is the descendant of the wild turkey of our woods. It is quite natural to assume that some person or persons in the early days caught some wild turkeys and tamed them and that from these our domestic turkeys are derived. Like a great many other plausible and widespread assumptions, however, this idea is incorrect.

Our domestic turkey and our wild turkey, though members of the same species, are different and distinct races. Though in the early days the American forests from Florida to Canada were full of wild turkeys, our domestic turkey did not come to us out of our own forests. It came from southern Mexico, and it is derived

from the southern Mexican wild turkey and not from our North American wild turkey. Moreover, it came to us by a very roundabout route.

Early in the sixteenth century the Spanish conquerors of Mexico sent some Mexican wild turkeys to Spain, and from Spain these turkeys were introduced into England, probably about 1525. Subsequently these domesticated birds were introduced into other parts of Europe and into Asia and Africa; and finally some of them were brought back across the Atlantic to America by English colonists.

Thus, while our wild turkey is a true and native son of the United States, the domestic turkey, which is so familiar a sight in our barnyards, came neither from Turkey, as some suppose, nor from our own woods, as others assume. It is in reality a sort of Europeanized Mexican; and before it came to us it had travelled from Mexico to Spain, and from Spain to England, France, Italy, and probably Germany; and long before it graced the table of any American President it had played a conspicuous part at the wedding banquet of Charles the Ninth, of France.

So much for the history of the turkey. Now for its natural history.

It is hard to make most people believe that the turkey is really a pheasant, but some naturalists so regard it, while others place it in a family of its own between the pheasants and the grouse. If it is not a true pheasant, it is certainly closely related to the birds of that magnificent group. There are only two species of turkey known to science: the Yucatan or Ocellated Turkey and our Wild Turkey; but the latter species is divided into several varieties, including the Southern Mexican Turkey, the Rio Grande Turkey, the Florida Turkey, and the Eastern Wild Turkey.

The differences between these varieties are comparatively slight but constant; and you can always tell a wild turkey from a domestic turkey (which, as already pointed out, is really the southern Mexican form) by examining the tips of the tail and of the upper tail coverts. In the domestic turkey these are white or whitish; in the wild turkey they are brown or chestnut, the tips of the tail feathers being little if at all paler than the tail itself.

In every region where wild turkeys exist they are among the most coveted of all kinds of game. Unfortunately in most parts of the United States these splendid birds have been quite needlessly extirpated. They are still fairly abundant here in the Carolina plantation country; some still exist in the wilder parts of the Appalachians; Florida still has a good many turkeys, while turkey hunting may still be enjoyed in Alabama, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and perhaps in other states of the Southwest. Pennsylvania, with her far-sighted and splendidly successfully game-conservation policy, is an impressive proof of how easy it would be for many other states to bring the turkey back in large numbers. There the turkey has increased rapidly of recent years and its future seems assured; but "it is doubtful," to quote Dr. W. T. Hornaday, "if even one flock exists in the North anywhere west of Pennsylvania"; while in New England, where the Pilgrim Fathers found the forests alive with turkeys, the bird was long ago completely destroyed.

It is a shame and a crime that this should be

so. Not only the Pilgrim Fathers but the first settlers in New York, Virginia, and Carolina found turkeys in incredible abundance. When De Soto's Spaniards reached the country of the Cherokees in upper South Carolina in 1540, one Indian town presented them, so says the old chronicler, with seven hundred wild turkeys. "Having rested very well during the night," wrote William Bartram, the botanist, describing his travels in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida in 1773, "I was awakened in the morning early by the cheering converse of the wild turkey-cocks saluting each other from the sun-brightened tops of the lofty cypresses and magnolias. They begin at early dawn, and continue till sunrise, from March to the last of April. The high forests ring with the noise, like the crowing of the domestic cock, of these social sentinels; the watchword being caught and repeated from one to another for hundreds of miles around; insomuch that the whole country is, for an hour or more, in an universal shout."

In the West the wild turkey could be found in almost unbelievable numbers a comparatively

few years ago. "While at this camp," says Col. William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill), "we had a lively turkey hunt. The trees along the banks of the stream were literally alive with wild turkeys, and, after unsaddling the horses, between two and three hundred soldiers surrounded a grove of timber and had a grand turkey round-up, killing four or five hundred of the birds with guns, clubs, and stones."

Of course, the wild turkey could not survive that sort of thing very long. It was not the Indian, not the many four-footed foes of the turkey race that exterminated this noble bird over most of its range. It was the civilized white man; and while in some regions the turkey's extermination was doubtless due partly to the clearing of the forests and the disappearance of its food supply, there are vast wooded areas to-day completely devoid of turkeys where hundreds could exist if man would give them a fair opportunity.

All that the turkey needs is reasonable protection from the human killer. It ought to be unlawful to hunt him by the method known as "roosting"—that is to say, shooting him by

moonlight or just at dim dawn in the trees where the flocks spend the night. The "bait and blind" method should be outlawed also, since in this manner whole broods are destroyed, and until he has reëstablished himself firmly in a region, the open season should be short and the season bag limit small.

As for the so-called "vermin" about which we hear so much—the predatory animals of the woods which prey on the game birds—the turkey will take care of himself against these. Here in lowland Carolina we have many wildcats or bay lynxes, many gray foxes, great numbers of raccoons, opossums, and minks. Yet the wild turkey has survived all these foes, is still fairly abundant here, and would be vastly more abundant if there were adequate game laws and adequate law enforcement to protect him against his human enemies.

I could tell here many true turkey tales. Wherever the wild turkey is found in considerable numbers he plays a prominent part in the woods lore of the neighbourhood, for there is no other wild creature, not even the deer, which in-

terests the woodsman more keenly. For my own part, I have had many adventures with wild turkeys—at least to me they were adventures, for every time I see a turkey in the woods the event is memorable; but my adventures with the bird have been less dramatic than those of various woodsmen of the plantation country who have told me or written to me about their experiences.

There was the Pee Dee hunter, for instance, who was using his turkey call early one morning at the edge of a swamp, hoping to lure a big gobbler within reasonable range. He was sitting behind a log, with his gun leaning beside him. After he had called a number of times, imitating the note of a turkey hen, he heard something on the other side of the log. Peering over it, he gazed straight into the eyes of a bay lynx or wildcat.

The hunter had used his call so skilfully that the wildcat had crept up to the log, believing that there was a real turkey behind it. The cat did not discover its mistake until it was in the very act of leaping over the log, and by then the

animal could not check its onset. The hunter by this time had seized his gun, and the leaping lynx passed between the man's face and his right hand holding the gun, its claws slashing his thumb and knuckles as it passed. He sent a load of turkey shot after it as it fled, but it vanished like a tawny ghost in the shrubbery.

There was another hunter who, riding along a narrow woods road, saw a wild turkey in the road ahead of him. Instantly setting spurs to his horse, he dashed at full speed toward the big bird. The turkey, of course, took flight at once; but it was unable immediately to gain sufficient momentum to rise above the trees and dense thickets hedging the road in on either side, and the hunter, rising in his stirrups, snatched it out of the air in mid-career and bore it triumphantly homeward.

Not long ago, on a plantation near my home, a wild gobbler strolled out of the woods shortly after daylight and gobbled truculently. From the plantation yard his challenge was answered by the big domestic gobbler who was the feathered lord of the premises. No one was moving about

at that early hour and the wild gobbler took a chance. He invaded the plantation yard, walked up to the tame gobbler, and attacked him with the fury of a wildcat. The tame gobbler was larger than the wild bird and fought hard; but he received the worst thrashing that he had ever experienced and might conceivably have met his end then and there if a negro woman had not appeared and put an end to the combat.

This sort of thing happens now and then where wild turkeys are fairly abundant. Occasionally, too, domestic turkey hens, ranging along the woods edges near the plantation buildings, are wooed and won temporarily by magnificent coppery-bronze strangers who appear suddenly from the depths of the forest. In all cases where the blood of the wild has thus been introduced in a domestic flock it is said that there is a notable improvement in the strain, the young turkeys being hardier and often attaining unusual proportions. I have heard of one man who went to a great deal of trouble in order to secure this infusion of wild blood in his stock. He dug a pit in a place frequented by wild turkeys, covered

it over with brush, moss, grass, and other material, and then scattered corn over the surface. When the wild turkeys had discovered the bait and had grown accustomed to seeking it there, the man secreted himself in the pit and waited until a splendid gobbler was feeding just above him. Then he thrust his hand through a small opening in the covering, gripped the gobbler by its legs, and carried it home with him.

The white man's civilization has done many terrible and needless things to the wonderful country which the first explorers found. The despoiling of America—the destruction of its forests, the ruin of its streams, the slaughter of its teeming wild life—is a sad story. We are waking up now and, at least in certain respects, we are turning a new leaf. Much of the damage which we have needlessly done is irreparable, but in some cases the damage can be repaired at least in part.

With a little care, a little wisdom, a little forbearance, the wild turkey can be brought back again to our remaining forests and to the new forests which we must create. In another chapter

I have made a plea for the bald eagle, the American national bird, the symbol of America's might and freedom. Let me now plead the cause of the wild turkey, "our other national bird," as it might appropriately be called, a true American, the finest game bird in all the world and one of the most splendid of all feathered creatures.

IX

The Magic of Still Waters

The Magic of Still Waters

ALL small bodies of water are enchanted. There is an elusive magic in them, subtle but strong, and any one who doubts this magic may easily put the matter to the test. Let him spend an hour or two in some wood or meadow where there is a pool or little lake. The trees or the flowers will hold his attention for a time, but all the while the water calls to him, and soon or late he will yield to the spell. Turning his back on the flowers and trees, he will find a seat near the margin where, as he rests, he can watch the surface of the pool.

There was a hollow in the hills where the wood thrushes sang more beautifully than I had ever heard them sing before, and day after day I was there to hear them, to listen, absorbed and fascinated, to the ringing of their golden bells. Best of all was it when, about sunrise one morning, a shower swept through the mountain

woods; for when the rain had passed the air was clean and crystal-clear, and everywhere in the shadowy places under the great oaks and the tall black-locust trees floated the fragrance of wild flowers, so that I moved through a forest rich with incense as well as with sound.

It was as though the songs of the birds had gained something in sweetness and in power from the fragrance of the flowers and the wet green leaves; and one could ask for no greater happiness that morning than to stand in the dim shadows under those ancient oaks and hear ten or fifteen wood thrushes celebrate the sun-god's slow ascent to his high throne. It was a melody as of bells and flutes and unknown instruments all of gold; a chorus of invisible voices, some near at hand, others far away, lifted not in ecstasy or in passionate love, but in a calm, pure hymn of praise, nobler and purer than any other music of the hills.

For a time, while that chorus was at its height, I could think of nothing else; but I knew that at the bottom of the hollow there was a pool or little lake, and presently, scarcely realizing where

I was going or why, I moved down the slope and seated myself at the foot of a tree where I could look out over the water. A kingfisher swept along the winding stream-valley and lit with a noisy rattle on a dead branch about thirty feet in front of me. On the opposite shore a green heron walked stealthily through the shallows, his long neck fully extended, the feathers on his crown standing out like the headdress of an Indian brave. Except these two, there was little visible life; but all around me was movement, all around the circle of the little lake there was a ripple of faint, mysterious, infinitely varied sound.

On the wooded slope above the wood thrushes were still singing, but their music, beautiful as it was, no longer filled my mind and drugged my senses. Of greater moment now seemed those small, furtive rustlings in the thickets round about me, and to these I listened keenly, trying to interpret their meaning. So for many minutes I waited, watching and listening, and for a long while seeing no living thing except the green heron and the kingfisher; but all the while my

mind was aquiver with an impression of invisible, abundant life hidden in thicket and brake, creeping down from the wooded heights to that small, sunlit, placid pool in the hollow of the hills.

Gradually, as I sat watching, this life revealed itself. A chipmunk's whistle shrilled out near at hand and was answered from across the pool. Here and there catbirds and towhees in the low coverts along the margins made their presence known, some of the catbirds whistling snatches of song. Brown thrashers darted from bush to bush close to the water's edge. The trees around the rim of the lake swarmed suddenly with white-breasted nuthatches, tufted titmice, and chickadees. Jays and downy woodpeckers and plaintive-voiced goldfinches, like flecks of brilliant sunlight, came and lingered a little while and passed on. Hummingbirds shot across the water and along the margins on swiftly whirring wings, and one—a male whose ruby throat seemed actually on fire—hung motionless in the air in front of me, examining with the most minute care a small dead twig of a young pine. Most interesting of all were the ovenbirds, those odd,

aberrant members of the great wood warbler family who are more like little orange-crowned thrushes than like warblers and in whom, no matter how often one sees them, there lingers still a certain quality of mystery and eeriness in keeping with the shadowy, secluded refuges which they love. In the woods above I had heard them singing, but they were wary, and I had seen little of them there. Now, as I watched beside the lake, I saw them come walking out of the dense undergrowths along the edges, like small, shy, dignified woodland sprites or elves, to promenade solemnly in the open before vanishing in the shrubbery again.

These were all among the smaller wild folk of the mountain woods; there was none among them that was rare or little known. Yet there had been a strange and memorable fascination in those moments when, sitting by the margin of the pool, I heard and *felt* the life around me, invisible at first and barely audible, stealing slowly and secretly down through the dim thickets and the whispering trees to the little lake at my feet.

Man's world was very far away then. That small, quiet pool, toward which all the unseen life of the woods was moving, had become the focus of the universe. And somehow it seemed not dead and inanimate but alive—the living heart of that forest; the soul and centre of the forest's life, the mother of all the creeping and crawling and flying things that dwelt in that hollow of the hills. It was calling to them in a still small voice alluring as a siren's song, drawing them to it with a mystical enchantment that somehow spread its power through all those woods; into every secret hole and crevice where a chipmunk lived; into the tortuous, dark tunnels of the blind, tiny beings who had their homes under the moist dead leaves; through the cool, dim, sylvan chambers under the green-roofed thickets where the ovenbirds walked like solemn woodland elves; through the crooked bark crannies and the high, leafy galleries of the listening trees. From all sides they were coming, the shy people of the forest, coming nearer and ever nearer, drawn down to that placid pool by an irresistible incantation too faint and fine for

human ears, a spell that the still waters wove.

The spell ended and the charm was broken when the life of the woods began to show itself, taking the form, for the most part, of common and familiar birds that I had seen often before. The sense of mystery faded then; I was back once more in the light of common day; the "visionary gleam" had fled. But for a precious interval the magic of still waters had possessed my spirit, the world of man had vanished beyond the utmost horizons of remembrance, and I knew that there were deeper secrets in the inscrutable woods than the prim scientist in his laboratory had ever dreamed.

It is at such a time as this and amid surroundings such as these that the influence of still waters is likely to be most potent. The secrecy and the blessed quietude of green wooded places soothe and invite the spirit; in the solemn woods the impression of mystery, of presences unseen and only doubtfully heard, grows slowly, like a gradual unfolding. There are other ways, more definite and yet perhaps more subtle, in which this influence sometimes makes itself felt.

Roaming idly along a lonely beach one morning in late summer, I thought of a certain tidal pool which was occasionally visited by strange and interesting birds; and the idea came to me that if I could approach this pool unobserved I might find some of these birds there that morning and be able to study them at close range. The pool lay well above the beach in a broad, bare waste of sand, and the only way of approaching the place unseen was by crawling several hundred feet under cover of a low sand ridge between the pool and the sea. When at last I reached the low summit of the sand ridge and, parting the sparse beach grass cautiously, looked down on the pool just beyond, I saw a sight that was ample reward for the pains I had taken.

The pool had changed its shape since last I had visited it. It formed a crescent now, the convex side facing toward me, and it was of that brilliant and luminous blue which one sees in shallow bodies of salt water under certain rare conditions of sunlight. Here and there along the edges were tufts of short green marsh; but for

most of their length the margins were bare of any growth, so that the blue water met the gray or yellow sand in a line as distinct and clean as the edge of a sword. Indeed, the image that leaped to my mind was that of a scimitar—a great blue scimitar, sharply curved and bluer than the bluest steel, left lying upon the sands by some gigantic Afreet who had passed that way in the night.

But the blue pool, for all its loveliness of colour, held my attention only for a moment. Around the edges of the pool, so close at hand that I could have tossed a stone into their midst, a company of tall birds of various shapes and sizes stood at rest; and among them were no less than twenty of the birds that I had hoped to find in that spot—wood ibises, the largest and shyest and to me the most interesting of all the wading tribes—great birds almost as big as turkeys, white save for their black-tipped wings and short black tails, strangely fantastic with their long, heron-like legs and long, curved bills. Yet the ibises were only a part of the picture; for with them, apparently all members of the same

flock and all resting together in perfect accord, were twenty snowy egrets, eight great egrets, five Louisiana herons, seven little blue herons, and two green herons—sixty-two birds in all, of six different kinds, including some of the largest and some of the most beautiful species to be found in North America.

I lay motionless, almost afraid to breathe, so close at hand were the birds. My dog had gone walking with me that morning. Far up the beach he had dashed away on some urgent business of his own; but I knew that soon he would rejoin me, startling the flock into flight. So, realizing that my time was short, I determined to make the most of it; yet the image that remains in my mind is not a detailed and accurate impression of individual birds, but rather a panorama in which details are lost in the beauty and strangeness of the general effect.

A painter could not have arranged the scene more admirably. In the centre, on the farther shore of the pool, stood the big wood ibises in a rather compact group close to the water's edge; and behind them and on both flanks the egrets

and herons stood, some with their feet in the water, most of them a little back from the shore. Thus nearly the whole inner margin of the crescent-shaped pool was lined with birds, and most of the sandy space between the crescent's wings was filled with them; and from my ambush behind the sand ridge I gazed at them across a narrow space of luminous blue water which intensified and made more brilliant the whiteness of their snowy forms.

Those were golden minutes. Just why they were golden I cannot tell, but the lover of birds and the lover of beauty and the lover of wildness in nature—the man or woman to whom Nature's wildness is perhaps her profoundest fascination—will understand. Here were birds and beauty and wildness commingled in a picture never to be forgotten. Here was a great bird-gathering which had burst upon me like a sudden revelation of bird-life in its most impressive and spectacular form; and the blue pool in the foreground, so intensely blue by contrast with the tall white birds ranged along its rim; the level, empty sand-wastes all around glinting and shim-

mering in the bright sun; the blue sky overhead where huge, motionless masses of white cumulus cloud towered like snowy mountains—these, too, were painted fadelessly upon my memory.

It was a blue and white picture—for the white birds far outnumbered the others—blueness of the sky and the bluer pool; whiteness of ibis and egret and shining, sunlit cloud. If there were half-tones in it—shadows and stipplings such as there must be in all natural scenes—I was scarcely aware of them. What I saw was a brilliant, almost dazzling picture in vivid blue and shining white; and its beauty of colour was perhaps the more impressive because from beginning to end it was almost wholly a picture of still life. The pool was alive with minnows, and I hoped that I might see the wood ibises at their fishing, dancing awkwardly about in the shallows and stirring the sand with their feet in order to bring the fish to the surface. But no ibis or egret or heron waded into the pool, and though some of the ibises moved about a little and uttered low, guttural, croaking sounds, most of them stood motionless in various fantastic postures, some

with their long, half-naked necks drawn in upon their chests, others with necks and bills fully extended.

Their grotesqueness, the atmosphere of mystery and of wildness which has always invested them in my mind, fascinated me. I could scarcely take my eyes from them; yet more beautiful by far were the great egrets and snowy egrets whose slender bodies shone with amazing whiteness in the brilliant light.

None of these moved. The great egrets, three feet or more in height and appearing even taller because of their slenderness, were scattered here and there among the snowies and smaller herons, and most of them stood superbly erect, their small heads reared to the utmost height to give them a wide outlook over the sands. Watching them standing thus, like shining images carved from whitest marble, I was aware of a queer, tingling sense of exaltation. They were so tall, so slender, so unbelievably white, so purely and radiantly beautiful in that sunlit place beside the blue pool and under the blue sky, that the sight of them so near at hand stimulated me like

wine, and the thought that soon this spectacle must end smote me like a calamity.

Yet that calamity, when it came, was no calamity at all, and it came at the right moment—before the freshness and strangeness of the scene before me had worn away. Suddenly one of the great egrets moved his head quickly, the sunlight flashing on his javelin-like yellow bill. The movement was slight, yet to all the flock it carried warning, and at once that blue and white picture of still life was transformed. It quivered now with vitality, with expectation, with imminent activity. There was an instant of taut, breathless suspense, each bird alert, vibrant, poised; then the whole army of them heaved upward.

To see them rise from the margin of the blue pool—rise and surge upward and outward

On those far-sweeping, wide,
Strong curves of flight;

to hear the wild music of their great pinions powerfully smiting the air—a sound that was like the sound of a rushing wind above a broad,

lonely waste of reeds—these were experiences which I would have walked many miles to enjoy. I had looked forward to this climax even while I dreaded its coming; but it was finer even than I had foreseen, for the birds did not simply ascend and fly straight away as I had expected. It was my dog that had startled them, and, their attention fixed upon the dog, they did not see me for some minutes, if indeed they saw me at any time. They were afraid of him, but not greatly afraid; and so, rising not more than thirty or forty feet, they continued to sweep round and round, passing and repassing over me in the arc of their flight.

Viewing them thus sailing and circling directly overhead and at such close range, it seemed to me that the whole air above the sands was alive with them—that uncounted hundreds of wide-winged, stately birds filled the space between earth and sky. The thought came to me that this was not the world of to-day, the world which man, the destroyer, has made his own. This was a scene from that far-off, infinitely wilder past when the tribes of the air were at the zenith of

their strength—when the largest and finest species of the feathered race still abounded in untold numbers, and every lake and fen swarmed with thousands of waterfowl, strange, fantastic, and beautiful.

Minute after minute I lay stretched on the slope of the sand ridge beside the blue pool, while over me the great birds circled and sailed, cutting each other's paths,

Swirling and poising idly in golden light.

Ibis and egret and heron swept back and forth above me; and in the strangeness of the spectacle, in its wildness and its stately yet outlandish beauty, I forgot all else and lived for the moment in that world of long ago before man was known. I was in the heart of the ancient kingdom of the birds, unravished as yet by the destroyer's hand; and I could have lain there for hours, I think, without growing weary of the sight. But a few minutes more brought an end.

Gradually the circling flock rose higher and broke up into its component parts. Most of the herons and egrets drifted away to the north-

east, while the wood ibises, after mounting high, sailed to the northwestward, at first flying in a wedge-shaped squadron, then in single file. Even at that great distance they were a noble sight—the long, slow-moving line of them, like cranes in a Japanese print, now fanning the air with measured, unhurried wing beats, now sailing onward with motionless, outstretched pinions. Finally they ceased their onward flight and began to ascend still higher in wide circles. I lost them at last close under the blue sky. It was not strange, perhaps, that for a time I travelled with them in fancy, climbing up and up

to the void of space,
The emptiness, the giant curve, the great
Wide-stretching arms wherein the gods embrace
And stars are born and suns.

They had gone, and the wide sands spread empty around me. I sat for a while beside the blue pool, my mind still full of the spectacle that I had witnessed. I had seen far larger flocks than this one. I had seen herons and egrets in hundreds and the wood ibis, too, I had often seen in

great numbers, and sometimes amid surroundings far more picturesque and, one would think, more stimulating to the imagination than the bare, level sand-waste where this flock was seen. Yet in this adventure there was all the freshness of a new experience; and there was something far greater than that—a sense of marvellous awareness, of sudden realization not only of the scene before me but of the mighty and everlasting mystery of earth and sky and the immeasurable wonder of life.

Now these moments of awareness, of intense perception, are both rare and precious. The green world lies about us for the most part invisible; the blue sky over our heads exists not at all; night after night we walk under the stars, and it is as though they were not there. To all of us, during most moments of our lives, Wordsworth's lament applies with melancholy accuracy:

This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

"Little we see in nature that is ours." The necessities of existence hem us in and command our time and thought. Our eyes are blind to the beauty of sunsets, our ears are deaf to the singing of birds, because our minds, our very souls, are keyed to meet the problems of to-morrow.

All this we know to our sorrow, and neither poet nor philosopher has yet discovered an infallible and universal cure. Yet there is something to be found by the margins of still waters that sometimes has power to make those problems fade and pass away; something that may help human minds and hearts to cast off the fetters of circumstance; something that may even cause dead human souls to awake and go out to meet the things that are to be seen, so that those things become truly visible and real, and we are made suddenly and vividly aware of the miracle that is all around us.

Just what this enchantment is I do not know. The life of Nature is a window through which we may catch glimpses of her mystery and beauty; and since water is a lure not only for man but also for most of the other forms of life, the

watcher beside a pool, if he watches long enough, will see most of the wild creatures of the neighbourhood. But the presence of life is not the whole secret of the magic that is in still waters. It is not only the ibises and the egrets that I remember when I think of that August morning beside the blue pool on the sands. The pool itself lives in my memory, not merely as a detail of the picture but as a sort of vital, energizing force, and without it the wonder of that experience would be diminished and its glamour would fade. And that other day beside the little lake in the hollow of the hills—there, too, something more subtle, more elusive than the life around me, helped to weave a spell, something that somehow seemed to have its source and being in the still water lying at my feet.

What this thing is perhaps transcends human understanding. It may be the old, familiar enchantment of the quiet, remote places; the healing, revivifying power which, in certain moods of the spirit, may be found in the deep woods and on lonely mountain tops and in the solitude of deserts and even in city gardens. Perhaps

this magic of still waters, which I have sometimes imagined to be a thing apart and alone and unlike any other force or influence in nature, is in reality only a phase of that larger magic which is immanent in all nature, though only at rare intervals are we conscious of its presence. Yet it is a strange thing to me to look back to those moments when the artificial world of man seemed farthest away and the beauty and mystery of earth and of earth's abounding life possessed me like a dream; for, looking back thus, I see again and again the gleam of still waters—the shimmer of quiet, woods-encircled lagoons, the blue or silver sheen of little lonely pools.

X

Sea Monsters

Sea Monsters

THE spring was late, but, in spite of the unseasonable chill, the sharks had arrived on time. The first of them that I saw came cruising along the inner edge of the submerged sand bar which makes a wide crescent about the mouth of Frampton's Inlet. He was a big fellow, some ten feet long, I judged, basing my estimate on the distance between his dorsal fin and his tail fin, both of which projected well above the surface as he swam slowly along through the white foam-covered water just inside the reef.

A few minutes before I had been thinking what a pity it was that this reef was no longer accessible to us when we came to the inlet to fish in the surf for channel bass. It had been in the past our favourite "drop," and throughout the first half of the flood tide we would remain on the outer bar, retreating only when the water in the slue behind had grown almost too deep for

wading. Although the winds and currents had now deepened and broadened the intervening channel and had cut down the bar itself until it no longer showed above the surface, even at low tide, I liked the place so much that I had been wondering whether it might not be possible at dead low water to wade the slue and fish for half an hour at least in the breakers on the seaward side of the bar. But any plan of the sort that might have been forming in my mind dissolved instantly when I saw that shark sculling along the edge of the submerged reef, not six feet from where I should be standing in the water if I permitted my yearning for bass to get the better of my common sense.

So we stayed where we were, standing in the shallows on the margin of the main beach, in water not over a foot deep, where no shark of considerable size could swim, and casting our lines well out into the surf at the mouth of the channel, between the beach and the outer bar; and often, as we stood holding our rods at rest and waiting for the bass to strike, we saw sharks, of different sizes, but most of them large, follow

the course which that first big fellow had taken along the inner edge of the reef. A few of them came in closer, swimming up the middle of the slue, their tall black dorsal fins reminding us of the periscopes of submarines; and we amused ourselves by trying to cast our lines on the back of one monster as he passed slowly by at a distance of twenty-five or thirty yards. Of course, we caught no bass. Where big sharks are so plentiful no prudent bass can be expected to linger. But if it was a poor day for bass, it was a great day for sharks; and, as the incident now to be related shows, they were not confined to the stretch of water where we happened to be fishing about the inlet's mouth.

While we were watching those living submarines cruising so peacefully and quietly through the sunny waters off the sea beach, two members of our party were spectators at a very different and a far livelier performance. They had left us that morning to return to the city—a complicated journey, the first stage of which was made in an automobile, the second in a river steamer, and the third on a train. They had

nearly completed the second stage, and the steamer had stopped at one of the last of the river landings, when my two friends noticed a commotion in the water some fifty feet from the boat, and presently saw something that I should have given much to see.

Two great sharks were engaged in furious combat. Dashing madly at each other, darting this way and that, the two warriors used their long and powerful tails as if they were clubs, and dealt each other mighty blows across the back. A big shark's tail is a deadly weapon. It can break a man's leg or even his spine; and the men on the steamer, noting the evident force of the blows that the two combatants rained on each other, marvelled no longer at the fact that they made no use of their trenchant teeth in the conflict. There was never at any time a sign of blood upon the water, but of the grim purpose of the gladiators there was no doubt. Soon one of the sharks began to weaken. His movements became slower, his blows less violent. Presently he turned sideways on the surface and then rolled over on his back.

Meanwhile, the other shark, as though satisfied

with the punishment that he had inflicted, had disappeared. Two men were putting out in a small boat from the steamer, carrying with them a rope with which to tow the dead or dying shark to the landing, when there came another great swirl in the water close beside the floating monster. The conqueror had returned to the scene of his triumph and, seizing his defeated victim in his jaws, he carried the unresisting body down out of sight.

That is the only battle of sharks that I have ever heard of along the Carolina coast, where in the warm season sharks abound. On the other hand, battles between sharks and porpoises (or dolphins as they should be, but never are, called), which are also common along the beaches and in the rivers, and which often ascend the tidal creeks, seem to be of comparatively frequent occurrence; though, with the possible exception of a few doubtful instances, when the distance was too great to make sure of what was going on, I have never seen one of these combats. A porpoise-shark battle is always a bloody affair; and since in the shark battle just now

described the combatants made no use of their teeth, it seems reasonable to assume that most of this blood is drawn by the porpoise, the shark fighting with his tail. It is the general belief among those who have seen encounters of this sort that the porpoise is the aggressor, that he is more than a match for the shark, that the latter would turn tail and escape if he could, but that the superior swiftness of the porpoise forces the shark to make as hard a fight as possible in self-defence.

Whatever doubts may be entertained about this theory, it need not be discarded, as some might suppose, on the ground that the shark, which can move at express-train speed when he wishes to, can hardly be inferior in this respect to his antagonist. The chances are that the porpoise is really the swifter of the two. I have known a big shark take hold of my hook when I was fishing for bass and carry out almost in an instant the whole three hundred feet of line on my reel. After an experience of that sort it is hard to believe that the ocean holds any creature capable of greater speed. Yet if a shark is an express

train, a porpoise is living lightning—when the spirit moves him. Watching a herd of porpoises patrolling the waters off the sea beach, or swimming about in some inlet between two coast islands, one gets scarcely a hint of the truly amazing swiftness with which these strange sea-going mammals can flash through the water. In general, they are slow-moving, leisurely creatures, and at a little distance they appear anything but graceful. That, however, is largely due to the fact that only a portion of the animal, the middle of its curved back, is visible when it comes every minute or so to the surface of the water. When, as sometimes happens, especially in spring, one finds a herd of porpoises in playful mood, one gets a better idea of their agility and grace. At such times they often leap clear of the water, the whole body being outlined momentarily against the sky, and then anyone having an eye for such things will realize instantly that the porpoise is built for speed.

A negro fisherman once told me a tale for which I will not vouch, but which I am not prepared to deny, since I think it may be true. With

another negro he was taking a scow through one of the smaller tideways that wind through the marshes of this coast—a narrow, shallow creek which went almost dry at low tide. A fair wind was blowing, and the men had rigged a square sail to help them as they poled their clumsy craft along against the ebbing tide. Suddenly, when they had reached a point where the creek was very narrow, they saw a porpoise in the water ahead of them. Tempted, no doubt, by the shrimp and mullet which swarm in incalculable myriads in the marsh waterways, this porpoise had remained far up the creek longer than was prudent, and now he was hurrying downstream with the ebb in order to reach the deeper waters below before the creek channel became too shoal.

The scow blocked his way. On neither side was there enough water for him to pass by, and it was doubtful whether there was sufficient depth for the porpoise to dive and pass underneath. He increased his speed as he drew near the scow, until he was fairly flying through the water; then, when he was still a few feet from the square bow of the craft, he launched himself up into the

air. In a long, beautiful curve he passed clear over the forward deck of the scow, struck the sail head on, broke through it like a greyhound leaping through a paper hoop at a circus, and, with no apparent slackening of his momentum, cleared the scow's stern and plunged into the water behind it.

The scow was some twenty feet in length according to the negro's story. This would imply a leap of at least twenty-four feet by the porpoise, and probably more, because these scows are generally high-sided craft, and the animal must have left the water several feet in front of the square bow in order to reach the elevation necessary to clear it. Perhaps the part of the story which seems most difficult to believe is the porpoise's plunge through the sail; yet this may not be a very serious obstacle, after all. The sails on many of the marsh negroes' boats are ancient makeshifts, composed of many patches of different sorts of cloth sewed together; and a plunging porpoise might well go through one of these crazy quilts as easily as a six-inch shell penetrates a brick wall. I would not swear that the

story, just as the man told it, is inaccurate; and, be that as it may, there are many other illustrations, less spectacular but no less impressive, of the porpoise's ability to travel as fast as, and probably faster than, any shark. This being the case—the porpoise being able to evade the combat if it desired to do so—there seems to be no good reason to doubt the popular theory of fishermen that in most shark-porpoise battles the latter is the aggressor, and that the long, lithe tigers of the deep who lord it over all the tribes of the fish kingdom give a wide berth whenever possible to these smaller kindred of the whales.

Yet it sometimes happens that the sharks turn the tables on their mammalian foes. I know of at least one instance in which a porpoise was beset by a whole school of big sharks and was driven to seek shelter in shallow water just off the beach of one of the coast islands. He found no refuge there, for the sharks came into the shallows after him and tore great gashes in him as he lay helpless in water too shoal to float his body. The fact that they used their teeth on this

occasion is no proof that they do not rely chiefly on their flail-like tails in combat with the porpoise; for when this porpoise grounded in the shallows the battle was over and it was time for the sharks to devour their victim. This incident emphasizes, by contrast, one advantage which, under ordinary conditions, the porpoise has over the shark and which is probably important. The porpoise travels generally in herds. Hence, a shark attacked by one porpoise is likely to find himself beset almost immediately by many others; and this, undoubtedly, is an excellent reason why the shark should avoid the conflict if possible, even if he were more than a match for one antagonist. If the sharks hunted habitually in packs, the porpoise herds might not exercise so easy a sovereignty over the coastal waters; but the sharks, though they may sometimes hunt in couples, are seldom found in large companies coöperating for defence or in the capture of prey. Only in case some large sea animal is wounded and bleeding is such a shark pack likely to form. Probably it was in this way that the shark pack mentioned just now was assembled. The chances

are that the porpoise was injured, perhaps in a fight or in some other of the numerous ways in which such a thing might happen, that it became separated from its companions, and that its blood upon the waters drew many sharks to the spot.

The surf fisherman entertains a kindly feeling for the porpoise. It is a good augury to see a herd of these animals passing along offshore, just outside the farthest line of breakers. The porpoises follow the schools of small fish, and where the small fish are the bass are likely to be found if the wind is right and the water clear. The surf fisherman knows the shark also and does not like him. He is a bad omen, a nuisance, and possibly a menace. He drives the bass away; he makes off with the angler's tackle; sometimes he bars the way to some desirable sand bar to which the fisherman would like to wade in order to cast his hook into the outer breakers. Sharks of considerable size had been landed with rod and reel, and their capture with this light equipment is excellent sport when the shark plays the game fairly. This, however, he seldom does. Nine

times out of ten, when he takes the mullet-baited hook, he simply chops the line or the leader in two with his knife-edged teeth. Then he is off like a flash, carrying with him hooks and sinker. And when there are sharks about, the surf fisherman, if he has any sense, is constrained to stick to the shallows. In the easy chair at home he will laugh to scorn the tales that are told of sharks that attacked anglers, but in the surf slues, with a tall black fin showing above the foam-flecked water, he is apt to regard those tales more seriously.

He need not be ashamed of his prudence. William Elliott, that paladin among Southern sportsmen of an older time, makes frank confession of the respect in which he held the shark. "On one delightful day," he says in his classic *Carolina Sports*, "I was tempted to wade deeper than usual into the sea, which was beautifully clear. I passed along the narrow ridge of a reef, which extended eastwardly to a considerable distance from the main bank, while a swash of some depth lay close within. I had unconsciously remained, until the advancing tide had covered

the highest parts of the ridge full waist-deep. Behind me stood my servant, 'Cain,' with my spear and a wicker basket of bait. An exclamation of terror from him made me turn, when I beheld, but a few yards distant, between us and the shore, and intercepting our retreat, a large shark, close on the side of the ridge, head on for us, and waving his tail backward and forward with a deliberate sculling motion! 'My spear,' said I; 'keep close to me, and shout when I do.' 'Great God,' said Cain (his eyes almost starting from their sockets), 'another one!' I looked, and saw, not one, but two other sharks, lying behind the first, all in a line, and in the same attitude! Doubtless the bait in the wicker basket had attracted them; the advancing tide had carried them the scent, and these grim pointers had paused to reconnoitre before they rushed on their prey. If they attacked us, we were gone! Not a moment was to be lost. It was one of those frequent cases in which we find safety in audacity. Repeating my order to Cain, and grasping my spear in both hands, I rushed upon the leading shark, and struck it down violently across

his nose—shouting, at the same time, at the top of my voice—while Cain, in a perfect agony of fear, gave a loud yell, and fell at full length in the water. The manœuvre succeeded; the sharks ran off for deep water, and we took the crown of the ridge, nor looked back, until we had accomplished the one hundred and fifty yards over which we had to wade before we regained the bank!”

Elliott says that after this episode he was ready to leave to “younger and more adventurous sportsmen the pleasures and perils of bass-fishing in the surf.” Yet, a fair measure of vigilance, a little ordinary common sense, and the surf fisherman is safe; and although not many of us are foolish enough to put the matter to the test, the sharks of the surf slues are probably not as dangerous as they look. I have seen a six- or eight-foot shark within a yard of me in the surf, and it was as badly scared as I was, which is saying a good deal. It seems a safe assumption that ninety-nine times out of a hundred the shark will make off at top speed. Yet, of course, the hundredth chance is always

to be considered, and there are a few apparently authentic accounts of mishaps with sharks hereabouts that teach the need of a reasonable degree of caution.

A few months ago an Edisto Island planter met with an adventure worth recording. He was fishing for channel bass, and, the fish being slow to bite, he sat down on the sand, fastening his heavy hand-line to his belt. Presently, feeling a movement of his line, he gave it a tug, and the next moment he was jerked to his feet and found himself being dragged rapidly toward the water.

He dug his heels into the sand and pulled with all his might, meanwhile reaching for his knife, since it was impossible to loosen the wet line from his belt. He could not get at the knife, and as for holding his own in that tug of war, he might as well have tried to hold an elephant. Within a few seconds he was up to his armpits in the water. In another instant he would have been dragged beyond his depth, but at that moment the line fell suddenly slack, and he knew that in the nick of time the shark had cut the line with his teeth or with his tail. That

it *was* a shark was settled beyond ail doubt a second later, when the waters parted and the monster rose above the surface in a splendid leap as it strove to shake the hook from its jaws.

Standing one day on the high sea wall of the Battery in Charleston, and looking out across the wide harbour toward Fort Sumter, I saw a thing so fantastic that at first I doubted my own senses. I saw a monstrous winged creature, like a gigantic bat, shoot up out of the water and then fall back again. It was visible only for an instant; and, keeping my eyes fixed upon the spot where it had disappeared, I asked myself whether I had seen anything real or whether the sunlight on the water had created an extraordinary illusion.

Then, after a few moments, I saw the thing again. It was far away down the harbour, at least a mile and a half distant from where I stood. But the day was very clear and the outlines of the creature were quite distinct; and even at that great distance it looked enormous. It must have been, I judged, at least ten feet wide and probably fifteen from tip to tip of its great

wings; and having learned something about devilfish since that time, I doubt whether this estimate was excessive. Then, however, I was a youngster, and I had never seen or heard of anything in these waters resembling that winged monster except the several species of rays or skates—we generally called them stingarees and clamcrackers—which are found on this coast. This creature that I had seen in the harbour was not unlike a ray in shape, but seemed many times as large as any ray that I had ever come across up to that time; so I concluded that I had seen the great-grandfather of all the rays, the king of the whole stingaree tribe.

I was not far wrong at that. The devilfish or sea devil is nothing but a colossal ray; manta ray it is sometimes called, its Latin name being *Manta birostris*. In appearance it is one of the most formidable of the sea's creatures. "Imagine," says Elliott in his book, which is too little known to this generation, "a monster measuring from sixteen to twenty feet across the back, full three feet in depth, having powerful yet flexible flaps or wings, with which he drives

himself furiously through the water or vaults high into air; his feelers (commonly called horns) projecting several feet beyond his mouth and paddling all the small fry, that constitute his food, into that enormous receiver—and you have an idea, an imperfect one, of this curious fish, which, annually during the summer months, frequents our Southern seacoast. . . . A school of these fish, as they swept by in front of my grandfather's residence, would sometimes, at flood tide, approach so near to the shore as to come in contact with the water-fence, the firm posts of which they would clasp and struggle to uprear, till they lashed the water into foam with their powerful wings." A strange sight that must have been and a tempting challenge to a man of ardent blood; and when Elliott had grown to manhood and had witnessed the sporting of these sea monsters on the surface of Port Royal Sound, he could not do otherwise than accept the challenge.

William Elliott's devilfish hunts took place more than three quarters of a century ago. Those were the halcyon days of the Old South. When

the Civil War came, that wonderful period ended. Devilfish hunting does not seem to have been resumed by the sportsmen of the coast when those of them that had survived the battlefield laid aside their arms after the struggle. Of this the trials and hardships of a stricken people may be a partial explanation; but so few are the records since that time of devilfish seen in these waters that a sensible decrease in their numbers not very long after William Elliott's day may perhaps be inferred.

Though they are still occasionally seen, the last one actually taken on this coast, so far as I have been able to learn, was killed in September, 1885. This devilfish had a sense of the fitness of things. It was to another Elliott that he showed himself, a member of the same famous Low Country family to which the author of *Carolina Sports* belonged. A storm was making up and the tide was very high when Mr. Elliott, who was accompanied by his brother, saw that the water beneath a wharf a few yards distant was boiling like a great cauldron. Investigation disclosed the wide black bulk of a devilfish lying

amid the piling under the wharf and churning the water into foam with his huge wings. Probably he had taken hold of one of the piles with his great feelers, just as, many years before, the schools of devilfish coming up the sound would take hold of the timbers of the water-fence at the old Elliott seaside plantation, and struggle mightily to uptear them.

The monster lay close to the surface. Three shots from a pistol fired into his back probably went clear through him. He turned and dashed through the water to another wharf, and coming in contact with one of the piles, clasped the stout post with his feelers and again, more furiously than ever, lashed the water with his tremendous wings. In a little house near by another Elliott kept his fishing equipment. Here were procured a large shark hook, with a length of strong rope attached to it, and a long, broad-bladed lance—perhaps one of the same weapons with which the greatest of devilfish hunters had sallied forth so often in search of his quarry. A negro, lying at the edge of the wharf, plunged the lance again and again into the monster's broad back; and

when, weakened by loss of blood, the creature's thrashing of the water had become somewhat less violent, Mr. Elliott got into a small skiff and, paddling close up to him, inserted the shark hook in his body, giving it a kick to make the hook secure. Then six or eight men, standing on the shelving bank at the base of the wharf, took hold of the rope and pulled.

There was still life in the giant fish, but he was dazed and bewildered. He released his hold on the pile and, following the pull of the rope, drove himself ashore with a few sweeps of his wings. When he was spread out upon the bank, he measured fifteen feet nine inches across the back from wing-tip to wing-tip.

There is something indescribably pitiful—many naturalists and travellers have noticed it—about the big animals of the sea when removed from their natural element or fatally stricken in the waters. Even the mightiest of devilfish hunters, too well accustomed to the slaying of these vampires of the deep, as he called them, to be unduly squeamish about it, was sometimes moved by compassion. “The turbid waters of

the river," he says in one of his chapters, describing a devilfish that had been harpooned, "have now given place to the transparent green of the sea through which objects are distinctly visible for feet below; and look, he is rising from his depths! Every struggle and contortion of the agonized monster is clearly to be seen as he shoots upward to the light. He is upon his back—his white feelers thrown aloft above his head, like giant hands upraised in supplication. There was something almost human in the attitude and expression of his agony—and a feeling quite out of keeping with the scene stole over me as I meditated the fatal blow."

Even the big sea turtle, when captured on the beach, often conveys this sense of almost human supplication. The sea turtle on shore is a lugubrious creature of flowing tears and mournful sighs. She is out of her element then, and she knows it, for she comes ashore only when the time arrives for laying her eggs, which on this coast is generally somewhere between late May and the end of July. On most of the island beaches, though turtle trails, or "crawls" as they are called, are

often found, it is only by rare good luck that one comes upon the turtle herself as she makes her way slowly and ponderously across the strand in the moonlight to the soft sand above reach of the tides; but there is one long low island to which these big sea creatures resort in such numbers that on almost any moonlight night in the egg-laying season, toward high tide or when the ebb has just begun, one may find turtles there and study their strange ways.

Not long ago, while walking this beach two or three hours after dark, we came upon a large loggerhead turtle, some three and a half feet long, in the act of laying. A few yards above high-water mark she had scooped out with her front flippers a deep circular hole about ten inches in diameter at the top and a little wider at the bottom. Around this she had excavated a shallow depression large enough to contain her body. In this depression she rested, and when we came upon her she had already begun the depositing of the eggs. Once this process starts the turtle apparently cannot stop but must continue until the last of the eggs, which may number two

hundred or even more, have been dropped. Hence, if she has already begun to lay, it is not necessary to use caution in approaching her, for she will go on calmly laying until she is through, though a regiment of horse, foot, and dragoons surround her.

The round, white, parchment-shelled eggs are dropped apparently two by two at short intervals, a slight movement of the hind flippers indicating the ejection of each pair of eggs. When the last of them have been dropped, the turtle at once begins to fill the hole with sand. For this purpose she uses her hind flippers, scooping and sweeping the sand into the hole, first with one hind flipper and then with the other and, at intervals, patting the sand down. This is a long and laborious process and frequently the cumbersome creature stops to rest. A great deal of muscular effort is involved in it, since, in order to reach fresh supplies of sand, she has to swing her whole heavy body from side to side across the depression in which she stands.

Toward the last, when the deep hole containing the eggs has been filled, the turtle uses her

front flippers as well as the rear ones in order to fill up and smooth over the larger depression round about the nest; and when she has finished this task and returned into the sea, even the most skilful turtle egg hunter, following her broad trail upward from the surf, cannot tell where the nest is, but must probe the sands for many minutes with a sharp stick in order to locate the hole. Sometimes, when a turtle has dug, or partially dug, several holes in as many different places before depositing her eggs, the search for her hidden store may last for an hour and even then fail to reveal the nest.

It is when she has finished filling up the nest and the hollow around it that the dolefulness of the sea turtle on land is most impressively displayed. Heavy, clumsy creature that she is when out of the water, she seems to be almost exhausted by the long labour just completed. Tears stream from the strange, dull eyes in the great beaked head; long, loud sighs, audible at a considerable distance, escape her; a big pendulous fold of skin or flesh under her throat expands and contracts. Slowly she turns toward the water

and, without a glance behind her at the spot where she has hidden her treasure, she begins her slow, difficult journey back to the surf.

If, at this stage, a turtle hunter intercepts her and turns her upon her back while he proceeds to rob her nest, her distress is pitiful to behold—though it is probably due to her own plight rather than to the taking of her eggs. Thomas Ashe, in his quaint account, published in 1682, hardly overdoes the pathos of it. “Before they kill them,” says Ashe, “they are laid upon their Backs, where hopeless of Relief, as if sensible of their future Condition, for some hours they mourn out their Funerals, the Tears plentifully flowing from their Eyes, accompanied with passionate Sobs and Sighs, in my judgment nothing more like than such who are surrounded and overwhelmed with Troubles, Cares and Grievs, which raises in Strangers both Pity and Compassion.”

The sea turtle is, in one sense at any rate, the strangest of our “sea monsters”; and to show wherein this strangeness lies I should like to add to this account of the creature’s egg-laying

habits certain other thoughts about turtles, and to this end I shall borrow from an earlier book of mine, *Adventures in Green Places*.

There is something grotesque and monstrous, even something uncanny, in the picture which a turtle trail paints in the mind: a great, shuffling, ponderous sea creature, perhaps three times the weight of a man, emerging from the surf by night in the ghostly loneliness of the moonlit beach, and lumbering heavily across the strand, to vanish presently among the shadowy dunes; and if one tries to analyze and explain the strangeness of this picture, he will conclude that it is compounded of several elements, but that the *unnaturalness* of the whole proceeding is the principal reason why it so powerfully fascinates the mind.

It is an almost invariable rule that the creatures of the sea do not emerge from the sea. Inhabitants of fresh-water rivers and lakes—alligators and water serpents, for instance—spend much of their time upon the banks; land animals sometimes go down into the ocean or into arms of the ocean; but the animals of the

ocean do not come out upon the land. With very few exceptions, they remain always in their accustomed element and are inseparable from it; and so this emergence of the sea turtle runs counter to one's instinctive idea of the natural order of things and produces somewhat the effect of a violation of the laws of nature.

And not only does it seem in this sense unnatural; there is even something of the supernatural about it, for it recalls irresistibly old legends of fabulous monsters of the sea. Very seldom in nature but very often in fable and myth, the dwellers in the deep come from their invisible, watery homes out upon the solid land; and so mysterious and so terrifying was the ocean with its unknown inhabitants that there was generally something evil and sinister about these mythical visitations, and the myth-makers could conceive of few things more dreadful or more terrible than this image of an apparition from the ocean's depths. Hence, while we moderns no longer believe in such things and have no fear, as we walk some lonely beach by night, that a strange and awful sea being may

emerge suddenly from the waves and seize us in clammy arms and carry us down to a dark sea cave, there lingers in us still some trace of that old feeling about the sea and sea apparitions, and there is still something, not terrifying but grotesque and almost supernatural, in the idea of a great sea creature coming up out of the moaning surf in the darkness to walk upon the land.

XI

A Watcher in the Woods

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I SAT at the edge of a sunny glade in Tiger Swamp while Didel the Ancient, Didel the Wonderful, showed me something new. Didel did not know that I was watching him. By waiting silent and motionless for half an hour or more at the base of an oak with which my stained brown corduroys harmonized perfectly, I had made myself a part of the swamp and had become invisible to most of its inhabitants. Didel was probably sleeping in his house when I arrived; and when he emerged and looked about him, his small black eyes detected no movement anywhere. So, mounting a low stump near by, he proceeded with the business which had brought him from his safe refuge out into the full light of day.

I watched him eagerly because I had never before seen him do what he was doing then; and while I watched, another inhabitant of Tiger

Swamp—a big, black-headed, gray-and-russet fox squirrel, as handsome as Didel was ugly—came from nowhere and sat on another stump twenty feet away and studied me in my turn. For perhaps a minute we two gazed at each other curiously, while Didel, thinking himself all alone in the wood, continued his queer performance in the slow, lazy way which is part of his very nature. Then suddenly a swift shadow slid past us, and, glancing upward, I saw the king of the air sailing a hundred feet above the tree-tops.

Didel did not see the eagle's shadow. One of the reasons why I think of him as Didel the Wonderful is the fact that he sees so little of what goes on around him and yet manages to survive. But the fox squirrel, sitting upright on the stump in front of me, saw that shadow even before I saw it.

He did not stop to investigate its nature. He knew that shadows often have claws—long, needle-pointed, cruel claws that stab to the heart; and he did not know that this shadow was made by a bald eagle, a bird that does not prey

on the furry inhabitants of the woods. Sometimes the great horned owl grows hungry long before nightfall and glides noiselessly on velvet wings amid the tree-trunks, searching for a victim. Beauty means nothing to him. He knows that fox squirrels are much larger than their little gray cousins and are therefore doubly desirable. Probably it was the thought of a horned owl's talons that sent this fox squirrel leaping headlong to safety when the shadow of the eagle's wide wings swept swiftly across the sun-dappled floor of the swamp.

In one long bound he vanished, and I thought it unlikely that I would see him again that day; but for at least a minute he had sat on his haunches in front of me, and that had been an experience worth while. For the fox squirrel, largest and handsomest of its race and altogether one of the most attractive animals of the American woods, is vanishing with the great virgin pines which it loves and which seem to be almost necessary for its existence. For months I had seen not one in woods where formerly many were to be seen, and I had begun to wonder

whether I should ever see one there again. Hence this fox squirrel of Tiger Swamp—a fine male in splendid pelage, his coal-black head contrasting sharply with the silvery gray and rich russet of his body—made an auspicious beginning for my morning.

He was not, however, really the beginning of that day's adventures. From Wappaoolah plantation house to the edge of Tiger Swamp is a scant half-mile across country, and the lumbermen have spread their blight along the way, so that one passes no longer through a forest of noble pines, but through an almost treeless waste of tall grass and rotting stumps. Yet there are birds in this waste, bluebirds and phœbes and flickers and various finches that prefer the grass-lands to the woods; and when you have come to the edge of the swamp and have begun to walk the old bank along its margin, you are likely to find tracks and signs if your eyes are sharpened for such things. Walking the bank that morning, I had noticed the slim, clean-cut tracks of three deer that had come out of the swamp in the night, and a hundred yards

farther along I had found the sign of a big bay lynx or wildcat. Then, turning into the swamp and sitting down to wait and watch with my back against a handsome young oak, I had become suddenly aware of Didel the Lazy, Didel the Wonderful.

I call him Didel "for short." The scientists know him as *Didelphis virginiana* and respect him as a being far more ancient than the so-called "missing link" and in many ways even more interesting. Most people call him simply "the 'possum" and think of him rather contemptuously as a little animal of no particular importance. They have not dipped into the book of the past, that marvellous past to which Didel belongs. They do not know the romance of his career, the epic of his long race history. They never realize, when they see Didel the 'possum, ambling through the woods at that slow, leisurely gait which has brought him safely down through ages and eons strewn with the bones of the swift and the strong, that this small, sluggish, insignificant gray beast is the most wonderful of all the four-footed inhabitants of our forests.

Didel the 'possum, is the sole survivor on this continent of a very ancient race, the race of the Marsupials or pouched mammals. Once the Marsupials were numerous and great, but eons ago they fell upon evil days. Little by little they were crowded out by other types better fitted to survive, and one by one they perished, species after species, and the newer types took their places and possessed the earth. Although in Australia and in South America other members of that archaic race still exist, Didel the 'possum is the only marsupial that has come down through all the changes of the ever-changing world of the past to roam our North American woods to-day and remind us of the marvels that have been.

What a picture, what a pageant, his life-history reveals! What a panorama of the measureless, marching years! What a vision of the endless procession of life in a million infinitely varied forms through the ages that have gone before! No other wild four-foot of our woods is half so ancient as he, for his history—the history of Didel's tribe—goes back almost to that incredi-

ble, far-off time when the gigantic reptiles of the dinosaur clan were rulers of the land, and those amazing flying dragons, the pterodactyls, were lords of the air.

Didel was here when the world was young. It has changed under his feet, but he still flourishes, though all that were his companions on the earth have perished and been forgotten. He was old when the mammoth and the mastodon were born, but he has outlived them both. He saw the rise and fall of the huge, horned Brontotherium; of Aphelops, the short-legged rhinoceros of the Middle West; of Alticamelus, the "high camel" of America, which had the neck and legs of a giraffe; of Castoroides, the giant, beaver-like rodent of Ohio and New York; of Latifrons, the wide-fronted bison, whose horns stretched eight feet from tip to tip and who ranged from Kentucky to Florida and Texas; of Megatherium and Mylodon and Megalonyx, those mighty ground sloths, which had the bulk of elephants, and some of which roamed the ancient American forests as far north as the Ohio River. Many and many a time Didel the 'possum crouched

in some hollow amid the roots of a tree while the terrible sabre-toothed tiger, known to-day only from its fossilized bones, sniffed and clawed at the entrance of his refuge.

All this is an old story, though familiar to few outside the ranks of the naturalists. You may find the facts set forth in books and treatises which geologists and paleontologists have written about the animal life of the past; books which frighten most people because they are ponderously written and are full of long, forbidding Latin names, but fascinating books, nevertheless. When I saw Didel in Tiger Swamp that morning, I thought of these old and wonderful things, because the sight of him always brings them back. But I thought of them dimly and vaguely, in my subconscious rather than my conscious mind; for Didel that morning was doing something that I had never seen him do before. He was showing me something new; something that was new to me, at least, though I had known Didel all my life.

He was half sitting, half lying on a rounded shoulder of an oak stump, in plain view, about

a hundred feet distant from me, so that with my field glasses I could see every move that he made, almost every hair on his hairy body. He was washing himself all over with the greatest care, and he was using his right hind foot as a sponge. At frequent intervals he would thrust this hind foot forward, the toes widely spread, and lick its under surface again and again with his long, limber tongue. Then, having moistened it sufficiently, he would apply the wet sole of the foot to the back of his head or to his neck or to his chest or side and, moving it slowly backward and forward, brush himself with it, grinning broadly the while as though he found the sensation enormously enjoyable.

For a long time he used the right hind foot only. Then he shifted his position slightly and brought the left foot into play. With one or the other of these two feet he could reach every part of his person, and I think that every hair of that hairy body was washed and brushed down while I watched him through my glass. At last, his toilet complete, he rose lazily and stood looking about him for several moments. Then he

turned slowly and dropped out of sight behind the stump.

I wished him good hunting. For the first time in my life I had seen a 'possum washing himself in the woods; and though I cannot be sure about it—for the 'possum has figured extensively in the literature of natural history—I think that never before has it been set down in black and white that *Didelphis virginiana* in his native wilds brushes his hair with his moistened hind feet and is probably as foppish a fellow as the 'coon.

Now, that was a small discovery and nothing to grow excited over; yet it was—to me, at any rate—a new thing in the life of an old and well-known animal, and it pleased and interested me even more than the coming of the fox squirrel which for a minute or two had interrupted my observation of Didel's ablutions. I lit my pipe to celebrate the incident, and waited contentedly, feeling already well requited for my vigil in the woods.

A towhee's contralto call came from a thicket

near by, and away to my left a brown thrasher was scratching amid the dead leaves, making more noise than a ten-point buck. Straight in front of me, about twenty yards distant, a hermit thrush perched on a horizontal twig, flirting his tail in that odd, nervous way so characteristic of the hermit. Blue jays called to one another from time to time, and a pair of white-breasted nuthatches high up in a pine conversed in low, nasal, matter-of-fact tones. Somewhere behind me a red-shouldered hawk was screaming, his wild, shrill cries ringing through the swamp, and once for an instant I thought I heard the low, querulous call of a wild turkey, only to realize at once that a red-bellied woodpecker was responsible for the sound.

This was a disappointment, but it carried my thoughts back to another morning in Tiger Swamp—a morning some months earlier, when we left the plantation house at crack of day and stole silently along a winding trail through the dim misty woods, sweet with the fragrances of early spring, hoping to surprise a big wild gob-

bler who had been making himself at home in that part of the swamp.

We did not find him. Perhaps that morning he was foraging elsewhere. But suddenly, ahead of us, like gray ghosts gliding noiselessly amid the trees, four deer crossed our path. Three of them had seen us and bounded along at high speed, vanishing almost at once in a thicket to our right; but the fourth, a young doe, had been feeding a little apart from her companions and was evidently ignorant of what had startled them.

She followed the others, but she moved more slowly, halting once or twice to look around her, turning her small, shapely head this way and that, testing the wind with her nose. For a minute or more we had her in full view, the slimmest and lithest wild creature of these woods, the wildest and shyest with the exception of the bay lynx; and by shutting my eyes I can see her still, one of the most beautiful of many beautiful woods pictures in which deer have figured—a slender, delicate, elusive daughter of the forest, fairy-like in her lissomeness and lightness; a dawn-phantom of perfect symmetry and grace,

gliding with bird-like airiness through the tenuous, bluish morning mist of which she seemed almost a part.

Fifty feet to my right a loggerhead shrike dropped like a bullet from a low oak limb and struck viciously with his strong, hooked bill at something amid the fallen leaves. Presently he flew to a thorny bush near by, and, impaling a big black beetle on one of the thorns, began patiently to pick it to pieces, discarding the hard, horny parts. A troop of chickadees and tufted titmice appeared, and in their train followed pine warblers, myrtle warblers, and a brown creeper. Meanwhile, a wind had risen and made music all around me in the trees, as I sat half drowsing in the sun; and, riding the wind, rising and falling in undulating flight, a big pileated woodpecker or logcock came plunging through the air, laughing as he came.

He is one of the sights of these woods, this greatest of the woodpeckers, and my drowsiness fell from me as he lit on the trunk of a young oak forty feet to my left. I see him often, for he is still fairly abundant here, however rare he may

be in most parts of the United States; but he is always a bird worth looking at, the wildest as well as the largest (since the disappearance of the giant ivory-bill) of all the numerous woodpecker clan. Seen in full sunlight, when the brilliant red of his long, slanting, rakish crest gleams like flame and the black and white of his long neck and powerfully built body stand out in sharpest contrast, he is a sight to be remembered; while of all the sounds of the woods there is no other, I think, except the scream of the red-shouldered hawk, that has the carrying power of the logcock's bold, resonant, oft-repeated cry, which to my ear sounds always like mad, exultant laughter.

Every feather of that scarlet crest stood erect as this Tiger Swamp logcock, sharp-eyed like all his kind, caught the slow, cautious movement of my head. With another laugh—a laugh of derision, I thought—he flung himself backward into the air and, spreading his wings, sped swiftly away toward the recesses of the swamp where I could hear his mate calling him.

For a little while my thoughts rode with him.

The sight of him had recalled a story told to me a short time before by a correspondent of mine who is not only a veteran hunter but also a keen observer of wild creatures. While hunting deer, he said, about sunrise one morning, he heard two pileated woodpeckers coming through the woods, making the air ring with their clamour. They finally came into view, and he stood in admiration of their swift, powerful flight as they moved from tree to tree, all the while keeping up their loud conversation, apparently talking to each other. Just then the hounds began to trail, and the hunter's attention was diverted from the birds; but suddenly there rang out on the still morning air a cry so loud and so distressing that for the moment the fierce music of the pack was forgotten.

"A large fowl hawk," wrote my friend in describing the incident, "had caught one of the woodpeckers. Like a bullet out of a gun the mate went to the rescue. In a few moments the bird was free, and they went back in the direction whence they had come, expressing their indignation by a constant clamour. I wish I could have

seen this rescue and how the birds managed it, but it happened in a live-oak with dense foliage, which prevented my seeing it. The hawk, as he perched in a pine after the woodpeckers had departed, looked considerably dishevelled and showed that he had been in a fight."

Perhaps that hawk had learned a lesson, one that he would never forget: namely, that the logcock is a bird to be let alone. These great woodpeckers travel nearly always in couples. When you see one, you will see or hear another not far away; and wherever they go they keep in constant communication with each other, their loud calls ringing and echoing through the woods. Probably, as in the instance just related, this serves as an effective safeguard against the danger of hawks, for the logcock is so large and able-bodied a bird that two of them acting in concert might well put even the hungriest hawk to flight.

All around me in Tiger Swamp life was breathing; but, except the familiar small birds of the woods, it was life that made no sound, that gave no sign, that kept itself invisible. Yet it was

there, lurking in its secret coverts, waiting perhaps for night to spread her friendly shadows when man, the universal enemy, grows strangely blind. If I had shouted aloud, deer would have heard me; probably a gray fox would have pricked up his ears; perhaps some pale-eyed wildcat, dozing away the daylight hours in his safe retreat, would have bared his long, white fangs as the hated sound interrupted his dreams. All these wild and wary woods folk are inhabitants of Tiger Swamp, and you may find their tracks and their sign if you will search for them in the right places, though only by luck or by long and patient watching will you see the animals themselves.

That day I watched long and patiently, hoping that some one of the larger and shyer woods dwellers would show himself. But no buck or doe came out to me. No velvet-footed lynx slunk out of the thickets to thrill me with a glimpse of the fiercest and most mysterious of all the four-footed wild killers, now that the puma or "tyger," as the early settlers called the great American forest cat, has vanished forever

from Tiger Swamp where formerly it held undisputed sway. For an hour or more I had to be content with little things, with small birds of various kinds, most of them silent since it was not the season of song.

Yet there were some among these little folk whom I would not willingly have missed: a company of brown-headed nuthatches; a troop of kinglets, both ruby-crowned and golden-crowned; best of all, a blue-gray gnatcatcher, who seemed unable to make up his mind whether I was a live thing of some outlandish sort or a harmless stump. He was high up in an oak when I first saw him and when he first saw me, and no sooner had his eyes lit upon me than his curiosity was aroused. Down he came from branch to branch until he had approached within ten feet, flitting from twig to twig of the low, bare bushes in front of me, peering sharply at me out of his alert beady eyes, his long tail jerking and waving incessantly. But for that tail, which was almost or quite as long as his body, he would have appeared not much larger than a hummingbird; but, tiny as he was, a mere

feathered atom, he was a personality not to be ignored. Like his close cousins, the kinglets, *Polioptila*, the gnatcatcher, is a strongly marked individuality, a bird of character; and, though on this occasion he uttered no sound, he made it plain that he disapproved of me as emphatically as I approved of him.

I could not help approving of him, for this was a gnatcatcher more obliging than most of his race. One seldom sees the gnatcatcher at close range. As a rule, he keeps to the upper branches, and so small is he and so active that it is difficult to obtain a good view of him there, while his rather quiet tints—gray-blue, white, and black—do not advertise his presence. Hence the bird, though widely distributed and fairly abundant, is comparatively little known and is not celebrated as he should be for his sprightliness and shapeliness. To appreciate his distinctive beauty you must see him close at hand. Then the gnatcatcher reveals himself instantly as perhaps the most perfectly formed of all American birds—a tiny, slender, spirit-like being, so gracefully proportioned and so delicately

modelled that, in spite of his sober plumage, he takes rank at once among the masterpieces of the avian world.

“We who write about nature,” says John Burroughs, “pick out, I suspect, only the rare moments when we have had glimpses of her and make much of them.” Yet if the great adventures come seldom, the small adventures, too, are worth while. Tiger Swamp had shown me nothing great that morning, nothing dramatic or spectacular; but it had shown me a fine fox squirrel; Didel the Ancient One washing and brushing his hair; a logcock whose crest was even redder and more rakish than the average; a blue-gray gnatcatcher who came down from his tree-top hunting ground to delight me with his fragile symmetry.

That was a fair reward for a half-mile walk and three hours or so of watching. Until nearly noon I waited. I saw flickers, downy and hairy woodpeckers, a yellow-bellied sapsucker, brown thrashers, towhee buntings, chickadees and titmice, a sharp-shinned hawk, and another hermit thrush. But now my mood demanded bigger and

wilder things. After a while I left my comfortable seat at the foot of the oak, and presently I sat down again to wait and watch in another spot where fortune had been kind to me in the past.

In front of me lay a little woods-encircled pool, beautifully blue in the light of the high sun, as smooth as a sheet of glass. It might have been in the heart of the virgin wilderness. Within two hundred yards passed a road; but it was little travelled, and I could not see it from where I sat screened by tall rushes, the trees at my back and on either side, the water in front. It was a secret, secluded spot, the haunt of deer and wild turkeys, of otters also, and of raccoons and foxes. But while all these visited it from time to time, the peculiar attraction which the place had for me lay in the fact that it was a favourite resort of the wood duck, the most beautiful of all the numerous wild duck family and to me the most interesting of all, because it is the only duck that is essentially a dweller in forests.

I sat motionless, watching and listening. Song sparrows chirped in the reeds around me; behind me phœbes and towhees were calling; a red-

shouldered hawk screamed in the distance, and his mate answered him. In the wet soil at my feet were the queer hand-like prints of a raccoon's paws; high overhead a great blue heron passed with deliberate wing-beats toward the river marshes miles to the eastward. For a minute or two my eyes followed the big bird's stately flight; then they returned to the still surface of the pool before me.

To the right a narrow stream, winding through a dense growth of young sweet gums, connected the small pool that I was watching with a larger one of which it was a tributary. Suddenly at the mouth of this waterway two male wood ducks appeared, swimming slowly. They were in shadow when they first came into view, so that their brilliant colours were almost invisible; but I knew that soon, if they held their course, they would reach the open, sunny centre of the pool, and I waited eagerly for that moment.

The moment came, but my eyes no longer followed the two ducks. Instead, they were fixed upon the entrance of the stream; for out of that winding water lane into the pool a whole com-

pany of wood ducks was advancing, a company that filled the narrow passage from bank to bank. I tried to count them as they debouched into the pool—there were some twenty-five of them in all, including two female mallards; and at least eighteen of the twenty-five were adult wood duck drakes in all their glory of rich bronze-green, iridescent purple, shining white, blue, and warm red-chestnut.

I watched them, wide-eyed and wondering. I could not really see their colours until they had passed from the lower shaded reaches of the pool to the wider central portion in the full flood of the sunlight. But there they all gathered, as though to reveal their beauty to the utmost; and there for a long time they remained, swimming slowly around and around, all heading in the same direction, so that the whole centre of the pool became a slowly revolving wheel or disc of many colours glowing and glittering in the sun.

It was almost as though a great circular flower had bloomed suddenly in the pool, a flower of innumerable hues, flashing and gleaming and changing incessantly as it turned gradually on its

stem; and even more beautiful was the spectacle when the birds, still swimming slowly around and around, drew farther apart from one another, so that the flower seemed to expand and the brilliant blue water of the pool was visible between the flower's petals.

For several minutes this flower-like effect lasted. Then, gradually, the revolving disc disintegrated as the birds, spreading outward in all directions, scattered more widely over the pool's surface until they occupied all the central sunny part of the tiny lake. It was then that the scene before me reached its climax of loveliness; for now that the flock formed a compact mass no longer, but had resolved itself into a company of graceful, gorgeously attired, many-coloured waterfowl, the beauty of each bird—its beauty of form as well as its beauty of colour—was sharply and brilliantly revealed.

We do not ordinarily think of ducks as graceful birds. That is because the duck that most of us know is the domestic Pekin or Muscovy, and because we see it generally on land where no duck is at its best. The much smaller and slenderer

wood duck—the “bridal duck,” as Linnæus called it—a true child of the wild and second only to the Mandarin duck of China in the richness of its plumage, is a marvellously graceful creature when it is seen swimming slowly on the calm, woods-encircled waters which it loves; and I have seen among water birds few spectacles richer in the quality of gracefulness than this company of wood duck drakes, plumed and crested and illumined by the sun, so that all their many colours shone with amazing brilliancy.

Minute after minute I watched them. Not only the loveliness of the sight, but also its rarity, made those minutes memorable. Over most of its range the wood duck is now so rare that a Federal law protects it at all seasons; and although it has held its own here far better than in most other parts of the country, I see it usually only in small flocks. Never before had I seen so large a company of male wood ducks so close at hand in a setting so perfectly suited to the picture; and the thought came to me, as I watched, that in all likelihood I would never see that spectacle again.

So while it lasted I made the most of it. This was one of those rare moments of which John Burroughs speaks. This was a great adventure—not because anything startling happened, not because there was drama in it, or because some hidden secret of nature was revealed, but because it was a moment of extraordinary loveliness.

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye;

but no mountain sunrise glows as vividly in my mind as this wildwood picture painted upon a smaller canvas, this little picture of a flock of wood ducks floating upon a sunlit blue pool in the midst of the woods. This was loveliness of another kind, a different order. There was life in it; it was the beauty of living things, of richly coloured, crested, graceful wild birds of a species world-famed for its beauty.

And there was another element in the charm of this adventure—the element of silence, even more important in this instance than the wildness and seclusion of the spot where the ad-

venture befell. To it was mainly due a certain impression of mystery, even of unreality, which grew more and more definite as the moments passed. It was as though I were witnessing some secret ceremonial of the wild, some mystic rite performed in this hidden place in honour of the invisible deities of the woods. The strange, slow coming of the procession out of the narrow waterway leading into the pool; the slow circling of the pool as the birds, first in a compact mass like a great circular flower, and then as individual units of the flock swam round and round, all in the same direction; most of all, the deep hush that brooded over the pool and all the surrounding woods, as though to utter sound were to commit sacrilege—all these things contributed to that sense of unreality which grew and deepened as the resemblance of the spectacle to a mysterious woodland rite took firmer and firmer hold upon my mind.

And this effect was never lost; the sense of mystery endured and grew stronger till the end. I do not know how long the birds continued to swim slowly round and round the pool; but at

last two of them, swimming side by side, left the circle and headed toward the entrance of the waterway at the pool's lower end; and those immediately behind followed them, to be followed in turn by all the rest.

So, gradually, the slow procession passed out of the sunlight into the shadow. The rich, iridescent colours faded; the outlines of each graceful form grew dim. Soon the head of the column vanished around a curve of the narrow stream. In a few moments the last of them passed from view, and the little blue pool—which somehow seemed no longer of quite so brilliant a blue, now that its beautiful occupants had departed—lay still and vacant before my eyes.

XII

Herodias the White

Herodias the White

WHEN we went down into that misty, shadowy wood a million miles from the world of man, the words of a half-forgotten poet framed themselves in my mind:

Heav'n sure has kept this spot of earth uncurst
To show how all things were created first.

But it was not so. Here also the curse had fallen. Here also the spoiler, the destroyer had played his immemorial part, and when the slaughter was over a virgin pine forest so splendid that no words could ever describe its glory had been wiped out of existence.

Years ago this massacre took place. Since then nature has worked hard and has covered the scars. I had not known the spot when it was a great primeval forest of gigantic straight-trunked pines, towering eighty feet or more without a limb, and so rich in lofty foliage that over all

that wide tract the sun never shone upon the forest floor and the deer and the tall wild gobblers could be seen far off along the shadowy aisles. So, not having known that former beauty of a nobler kind, I could glory in the new loveliness that nature had created here; and to me the few scattered pines that remained were not melancholy reminders of a majestic and stately past but were a delight in themselves because of their superb height, their high crowns of whispering foliage, and their massive, plated trunks, aglow with bronze and purple and orange-tawny tints, soaring straight upward through the arching boughs of the broad-leaved trees and the slim young cypresses that had now made a new and denser forest of their own where once the great pine wood had been.

It was with no feeling of sadness, therefore, that I walked the path along the edge of the lagoon that April morning. Whatever it had been in the past, the place was so beautiful now that I could wish for or imagine no greater beauty. The path was like a tunnel through the woods; for although the lagoon lay at our left hand, the trees did not

halt at the water's edge and the lagoon was not an open lake but a flooded cypress forest along the narrow water lanes of which one might paddle in a punt until at last, deep in the flooded woods, he came to a city of white ibises.

That ibis city was our goal; but when we reached the spot where the punt was hidden we found it damaged beyond repair. So we held to the path through the dry woods instead of travelling the water paths of the lagoon; and it was due to this chance that we saw a thing perhaps stranger and more beautiful than anything that we might have seen in the ibis rookery.

The path, I have said, was like a tunnel through the forest. It was a straight narrow way, hedged in and over-arched by green boughs and the trunks of trees; shadowy, misty, mystical; in places brilliantly illumined by the April sun; in places speckled and dappled with flecks of golden light; in places dark, cool, bathed in light that was not golden but silvery, tapestried with long pendants of Spanish moss. It was, moreover, a path where, at any moment, some great thing might happen—where, at any moment, you

might see far ahead of you in that shadowy tunnel under the trees a splendid whitetail buck or an otter or a gray fox or a tawny, fierce-eyed lynx.

We saw none of these furtive wild things. For a while only the smaller inhabitants of the woods showed themselves, and the bird voices that we heard were voices that we knew well. In the flooded woods to the left prothonotary warblers were singing, and now and then we caught glimpses of them, small jets of orange-yellow flame against a background of green frondage or silvery moss. Overhead parula warblers sang cheerfully, active, elusive feathered sprites in blue and gold with facings of white and black. Less fairy-like but even more brilliant was a yellow-throated warbler building its nest in a drooping plume of Spanish moss about twenty-five feet above the path. The far-carrying screams of red-shouldered hawks, among the wildest of all bird cries, rang and echoed through the woods. Near at hand a handsome red-bellied woodpecker, whose head and neck were of a most vivid scarlet, clung to a cypress trunk not

more than a foot above the surface of the water, one beady eye cocked aloft at a pearl-gray black-crowned night heron winging over us noiselessly as an owl.

A swift shadow slid past us, another and another; and first three and then five or six white ibises sped over, just topping the summits of the trees—big birds, snow-white with black-tipped wings and long curved bills of brilliant orange or crimson. There was a fantastic quality in their beauty well suited to that wild spot; and there was something, too, in their swift and vigorous flight, much swifter than that of a heron and suggestive of the flight of curlews and other strong-winged birds of the wind-swept coasts, that added to their wildness. In an instant they were out of sight behind the tree-tops; but with my mind's eye I could follow them on their flight to the ibis city in the cypresses of the lagoon and could see them come to rest there amid scores of other ibises and many herons.

From thoughts of these great birds I returned to smaller things: to the bright-plumaged,

sprightly warblers that we saw and heard from time to time; to a cardinal and a Carolina wren singing in the distance as though each would out-sing the other; to an Acadian flycatcher, a little olive-green hermit, shy, secretive, silent, sitting so still on a twig some sixty feet away that we would have passed without seeing him had not my eyes, searching the branches for a squirrel, happened to light upon a tiny object resembling the tail of a very small bird projecting from behind a water-oak leaf.

I spent some minutes with the Acadian, who is one of the smaller and less abundant members of the flycatcher tribe, a dweller in the deep woods, not to be seen every day; but except for his rarity, there was nothing to distinguish the little dull-coloured, silent, rather stolid bird with the pretty name who lacks the sweet pensiveness and the gentle personality of his better-known kinsman, the wood pewee. In another mood, perhaps, I might have remained longer in his company; but there was a fascination in that tunnel-like path through the forest that would not be denied. It was a path that beck-

oned. To right and left and above the forest hemmed us in, shutting off the view. But walking the path, one could see far ahead; and now, though dim glimmering shadows still lurked in it and preserved its mystery, there were long stretches bathed in the mellow glow of the high sun so that the path was like a long shaft of softened golden light striking deep into the heart of the woods.

So I left the little flycatcher sitting stolidly on his twig and returned to the place where my companions were waiting; and we had walked only a few steps farther when we saw the most wonderful sight that we had seen that day or in many days.

Ahead of us in the narrow path, where a moment before no living thing had been visible, appeared a snow-white being, tall, stately, slender, shining like whitest marble. So tall did it seem that for an instant I could scarcely believe it to be a bird. Seen at the end of that long, leafy tunnel, walled in by shrubbery and the smooth boles of trees and roofed with green boughs from which long, pointed pennons of

Spanish moss hung down, its stature appeared equal to that of a man. Any bright or conspicuous object viewed at the end of a long, narrow vista is likely to appear larger than it really is; and doubtless in this instance the slimness of the object at which we were gazing and its shining whiteness helped to create the illusion of height—an illusion so strong and so persistent that even when I realized that this tall, immaculate being was a bird, I could not at once recognize it as a bird that I knew well, a great egret of the species known to naturalists as *Herodias egretta*. To my eyes it was almost twice as tall as the great egret *Herodias* which, nevertheless, is one of the tallest of American birds; and for a moment I wondered whether it was possible that the giant white heron of the tropics had strayed northward hundreds of miles to stand before us like some shining alabaster image in that lonely path through the woods and show us a spectacle not only beautiful but new.

This thought faded almost before it had formed itself in my brain. I knew in an instant that this bird of the forest path was not the

great white heron of the tropics, whose northern limit is southern Florida, but only a great egret, the familiar *Herodias egretta*, a species which was rare twenty-five years ago because the plume-hunters had slaughtered it in thousands together with its smaller relative, the snowy egret, but which is now fairly abundant once more in its old haunts. But it mattered little what the bird was—it was the beauty of the spectacle that filled my mind; and that beauty, I think, was of a finer and rarer quality because the bird was a great egret and not a great white heron, since the egret, though somewhat less in stature, is slenderer and far more graceful, perhaps the most graceful of all American wild creatures.

I had seen it hundreds of times, and so have many other lovers and students of birds; and, because it is at home here in lowland Carolina, I had seen it under more favourable conditions than most men—not merely in pairs or in small groups far away on some wide meadow or marsh where distance and the spaciousness of the background dimmed and blurred its loveliness. I

had seen it in large flocks, close at hand in its breeding places on the dream-like, inexpressibly beautiful cypress lagoons, where the trees were white with the great snowy birds and the air was aglitter with their slowly waving, radiant wings. I had thought that I had seen it at its best; that it could never appear more beautiful than when I studied it at close range, in every conceivable pose and mood, in its populous breeding strongholds; that I had known and enjoyed all the beauty it had to offer. But that day in the forest path I realized that this was not true.

In this egret of the forest path there was a quality or kind of beauty that I had never found in an egret before. Undoubtedly this was a result of the conditions under which I saw the bird: standing erect and solitary in that long tunnel through the woods—that narrow, luminous sylvan aisle, bathed in soft golden light, yet shadowy and mysterious as a path through some enchanted woodland in the Kingdom of Dreams, shut in on either side by the shadowy wall of the forest, ceilinged and bannered with festoons of silvery moss. The path itself was indescribably

beautiful; it had been a delight merely to stand and let the eye wander down that long leafy vista reaching far into the depths of the dim woods. And when in the path the egret suddenly appeared and stood at gaze, amazingly tall and marvellously white—a ghost-like figure yet whiter than any ghost of fancy, white with the pure and brilliant whiteness of snow—the effect was startling and even bewildering, and in the picture there was a loveliness that seemed not wholly of this natural world, an unearthly beauty destined to haunt the memory for years.

XIII —

The Birds of Joy

The Birds of Joy

*Sing, sing again, ye little birds of joy!
Call out from tree to tree and tell your tale
Of happiness that knoweth no alloy . . .*

JAMES STEPHENS.

ON A little green hill in a lonely, beautiful valley, rich with old legends of a forgotten past, I waited for the sunrise. I had gone out early to spend an hour in a certain ravine in the woods where a small mountain brook flowed amid rocks and mossy logs in the shadow of tall hemlocks and lustrous rhododendrons. Being in the mood for such fancies, I told myself that this was no ordinary quest; that this time I was not in search of birds or chipmunks or squirrels or any of the mortal inhabitants of the woods. That shadowy ravine was just such a place as the Nunnehi might inhabit, those mysterious spirit people who lived under the rocks and spent most of their time dancing and singing and making sweeter music than any man could make; and the little stream flowing through the ravine was just such

a stream as the Amayinhi might dwell in—the friendly water sprites to whom, in the old days, before the white men drove all the native fairies into exile, the fishermen used to pray.

A hundred times, in that valley of old legends, I had thought about these and the other spirit beings who were so well known to the ancient race which formerly inhabited all that beautiful mountain country; and a hundred times I had thought how sad a thing it was that when the white man came all these native spirit folk had to go. Why could we not have kept them, adopting them for our own and letting them live on in their old homes, invisible and yet as real to our children as they were to that vanished people whose lands we have taken with a merciless hand? But this could not be—or, at least, it has not happened so. With the Indian we destroyed also all the poetry of his race, all the myths, all the fairy folk that his fancy created and made real; so that now there are no native fairies in our woods but only alien fairies from over the sea, from Britain and Germany and even from far-away Greece, and our children know nothing

about the Nunnehi and the Amayinhi and their very names are strange and difficult in our ears.

So, thinking of these things, I had climbed the green hill in the chill twilight before dawn, pretending that the Nunnehi still lived in their old haunts under the mountains and saying to myself, just for the fun of it, that in the little stream in the ravine I might see some of the friendly water sprites who had been seen there so often in the past. But my mind was not wholly occupied with these odd fancies, and when I drew near the top of the hill where the valley meadows ended and the woods began, I halted and sat down, intending to rest there for a short time before pushing on to the ravine in the woods. I knew that in a few minutes the sun would appear above the high mountain range bounding the valley on the east, and I thought that I would wait for a little while on the valley's western rim and see the day come to the open meadowlands spread below me.

It was a dull, chill world. Over all was a gray, faint, desolate light, cold, lifeless, hard with the hardness of steel. In that livid light all bright,

warm colours lost their brightness and warmth, all dark colours were made darker. The valley below me was not green but gray; the woods above were sinister and forbidding; beyond the valley, the high mountains, their tops blanketed with leaden clouds, loomed black and inimical toward a cold gray sky. Behind me I heard the ghost of a sound, and, turning my head quickly, I saw a black and white warbler searching for his breakfast amid the branches of a young pine at the woods edge. Small and silent though he was, he was good company on that depressing, lifeless morning, and for some minutes I sat watching him. He moved out of sight at last behind the trunk of a pine, and I turned again to watch the sombre ridge across the valley beyond which, "not slower than Majesty moves," the invisible sun was climbing toward the mountainous rim of the world.

And lo, in the East! Will the East unveil?
The East is unveiled, the East hath confessed
A flush: 'tis dead; 'tis alive: 'tis dead, ere the West
Was aware of it: nay, 'tis abiding, 'tis unwithdrawn:
Have a care, sweet Heaven! 'Tis Dawn.

He came that morning—the “lord Sun,” as Sidney Lanier calls him in that memorable hymn of sunrise—with but little of the far-flung splendour of the skies that so often heralds his coming.

Now a dream of a flame through that dream of a
flush is up rolled:

To the zenith ascending, a dome of undazzling gold . . .

but except for this dome, brilliant and yet undazzling, towering higher and higher above the mountain wall, there was no painting of the skies; there were no rays or lances of light thrust far across the firmament, no celestial fields of colour to glorify the heavens overhead. I have seen many sunrises which in themselves were far more splendid; the glory of this one was of another kind, being almost wholly an earthly glory, a glory of the earth and the things of earth. Suddenly from that brilliant golden dome up-reared above the eastern mountain wall a flood of light swept down into the valley like a swift tide; and sitting there on the valley's western edge I saw the gray, lifeless amphithea-

tre below me transformed almost in the twinkling of an eye.

In an instant all the hidden beauty that was in it was made visible. It was not merely that the light of the sun revealed the colours of the landscape. I knew all those colours; from this same spot above the little valley I had seen and studied them many times. There were colours in the valley now that I had never seen there before, lustrous purples, translucent lavenders, delicate pinks and blues and many kinds of gold; and all the visible world—the meadows below me, the sentinel mountains, the arching sky, the misty veils of cloud—shone with a new splendour, and all the familiar sounds of the valley were clearer and more musical, and every bird that moved seemed more than ever a being of almost celestial buoyancy and grace.

At first I scarcely saw or heard the birds. For some moments my mind was filled with the sudden revelation of beauty, the panorama of varied and luminous colour, each shade and tint of it touched with the magic of the dawn-light. But swiftly came realization of a more vital thing

than this opulence of colour, and it was the birds that made me aware of this more vital thing. They were everywhere now: wherever I looked I caught the shimmer of little wings: from the valley below and the woods above their voices floated on the still air until there was scarcely a moment of silence and the whole world seemed aquiver with happy, exuberant sound.

On stalks of ironweed and goldenrod thrust up above the dewy grasses scores of field sparrows were singing, while here and there among them brilliant indigo buntings, bluer than the blue sky, flashed their bright pinions in the sun. Beyond and above these bluejays were continually flying back and forth across the valley, raining down their wild cries, and with the jays were many flickers, riding the air in undulating flight, calling loudly to one another, splashing the atmosphere with vivid gold at every beat of their vigorous wings. Two kingfishers shot past like short, winged arrows, painted blue and white; from the woods edge across the valley came the queer, endlessly repeated calls of white-

breasted nuthatches; in the woods above and just behind me chickadees and tufted titmice were calling, and at short intervals, farther up the slope, a hooded warbler sang.

Then, when the risen sun made yet more luminous the unbelievable colours that the dawn had spread upon hill and valley, a company of goldfinches, sprinkling melody as they came on, swung down across the hillside meadow close to the spot where I was sitting and, hovering for a moment in the air, settled upon the motionless heads of a clump of ironweed in front of me and a little below, so that, looking down, I saw the tiny golden birds against the great purple blooms.

There for some minutes they rested and moved from bloom to bloom, talking cheerfully with one another and singing a little when the spirit moved them. Looking down at them, with the glory of the dawn-light still shining on the valley under me and the mountain walls beyond, softest lavender now under the deep blue sky, I thought that I had never seen a lovelier or a happier company: and suddenly, as I watched

and listened, my mind awoke to full awareness of that more vital thing of which I spoke a moment ago, that greatest of all the secrets that one may learn in the green world, a secret that is no secret at all and yet remains hidden from many throughout their lives—the secret of earth's everlasting happiness, happiness triumphant over terrifically cruel law.

Nature is a whimsical mistress. When we go walking with her, we never know where she will lead. I had gone out—or, at least, so I had pretended—in search of fairy folk, the vanished Indian fairy folk who once inhabited those hills; but as I rested there on the little green hill above that valley of old legends, the Nunnehi and their kindred were forgotten.

I had found something even better than they, something better than the glory of the sunrise. I had found one of those moments of awareness, of realization, when the mind seems to awaken from a lethargy and mighty things are made visible. This mighty thing that suddenly shone before me, this great truth of nature's everlasting and triumphant happiness, was not for me a

new discovery. Yet it thrilled me that morning like some vast revelation never dreamed of before, and in the spell of it my thoughts sped back once more to a lowland country far away and a winter morning long ago when for the first time the *fact* of nature's happiness crystallized in my mind as a clear-cut and tremendous truth.

Death was abroad in the lowland woods that day. Far away to the right, yet not so far as I had supposed a moment before, the lean black hounds were following the trail. Loud above the savage medley of their voices rang the whoops of the drivers, now shrill and thin like the screech of a freight engine's whistle, now rich and full like the notes of a singing woman. Somewhere in front of the tumult, in front of the eager pack and the plunging horses of the drivers, a deer was bounding through the forest.

I stood erect, my back to a big oak, my finger on the trigger. My muscles tightened, my eyes searched the sun-splashed vistas beneath the moss-hung boughs. Straight toward my stand

the hunt was sweeping, filling the forest aisles with fierce, reverberating sound. At any moment the deer might burst into view—a slim, dun-coloured vision, swift as the wind, visible for an instant, then gone forever if in that instant my charge of buckshot failed to bring him down.

A minute, two minutes of suspense—and the chase had passed me by. Deer, dogs, and horse-men had swept on to the left, scarcely a hundred yards from my oak, but hidden always by the trees and the evergreen thickets beneath them.

I was not wholly sorry. Though for a while the old hunting fever had possessed me, even in those days I had begun to be conscious of a new feeling for the wild creatures of the woods. Before the pack had come my way, I had been watching with keen interest the small wild life of the forest around me—cardinals, towhees, myrtle and pine warblers, goldfinches, chickadees, tit-mice, kinglets, white-throated sparrows, downy woodpeckers, white-breasted nuthatches, and gray squirrels; and now that the hunt had passed on and the clamour of the dogs had been softened by distance, I looked again for these small people

of the lowland woods and listened eagerly for their cheerful voices.

I looked and listened in vain. Around me the forest stretched silent and empty, desolate as a tomb. Nowhere was there a sign of life, and I had made up my mind that the birds had been frightened away by the clamour of the pack when suddenly a ruby-crowned kinglet close above my head began to scold. From a thicket near by a towhee answered with his contralto call, and at once, as if at a signal, the woods came to life again. For a brief interval, while the cries of the pack had filled the forest with uproar, fear had cast its pall over all the little folk that watched and listened in the shrubbery and trees; but now, all in an instant, the shadow of fear was gone.

One moment the chill of terror in every wild creature's heart, a silent forest where nothing moved; next moment a score of careless voices calling, a forest lit with colour and quick with sound. Well, what of it? Thousands of men and women have seen this same thing happen, and so,

too, I had seen it many times, yet never before had I realized what it meant. Why it was that awareness came to me that morning I do not know; but as I pondered there at the foot of my oak, my eyes were opened to a transcendent and radiant truth that grew and grew and blossomed and bloomed in my mind and filled my spirit with a vague joy so deep and so powerful for all its vagueness that it seemed to shake my very being.

It was, although I did not realize this fully at the time, the joy of spiritual deliverance. I had read and studied what scientists and philosophers had written about nature's iron laws, the pitiless struggle for existence, the deadly battle for life raging unseen in every meadow and grove. I had learned that in the green world slaughter never ceases, that life is rooted in death, that all nature is a battlefield where thousands of lives are blotted out each moment in order that thousands of other lives may go on until they, too, are blotted out. And from these facts I had formed, unconsciously perhaps, a grim conclusion:

namely, that over all the world of wild nature hung always the shadow of fear; that the wild creatures of meadow and wood and sea and air, the actors in this merciless struggle for existence, the victims of evolution's ruthless laws, lived and moved and had their being forever under the dark pall of that shadow.

It is not so. If it were so, then this would be the devil's world indeed and hell would be here at our doorstep. That day in the lowland woods, through some whim of nature granting me vision where before I had been blind, I saw what I had never really seen until that day: that the fear which the wild creatures know is a little thing, a transient, minor factor in their lives. Probably, long before, I had known this vaguely, but I had never grasped its vast and profound significance. It is the first and most important truth to be learned in the woods, for until we learn it we shall find no healing there, no balm for the spirit, no rest. Sometimes the learning is hard. We shall see death and suffering in the woods, and we shall see fear. But death and suffering are everywhere in this world, and life is worth living in

spite of them; and the fear that we shall see in the woods is not the kind of fear that we have imagined it to be.

It is a strange, almost a friendly fear. It is a swift fear, coming swiftly, passing swiftly, casting no shadow before it, leaving no mark behind. When the immediate cause is removed, it vanishes, and there is no realization that it will come again. It does not follow like an assassin; it does not haunt like a spectre; it does not stalk through the woods by day and by night like some dreadful demon or ogre, making the earth tremble and all the creatures of the earth. It is not the first and greatest law of the wild, as some would have us believe—the ruling passion or emotion of all the dwellers in the wild, guiding their every action, shadowing every moment of their lives. You will find that kind of fear in the books, but you will not find it in the trees where the squirrels are playing, in the air where the swallows are gliding, in the streams where the fish are leaping.

Use your eyes. Use them and have faith in them. Trust them far more than you trust the

words of the realistic novelist, for instance, who emphasizes his dreary picture of human wretchedness by pointing to the ruthlessness of wild nature, the fear and the suffering and the slaughter in grass and brake, in forest and field, in marsh and sea. The realistic novelist is often a bad naturalist. He has seen—probably at second hand—the fear and the suffering and the slaughter, and from these he has drawn his conclusion and written his book. He has not seen, though any woodland or meadow would reveal it to him, the simple and splendid truth: that in spite of danger and terror and struggle and pain, the great majority of nature's wild children are happy during all except a few fleeting moments of their lives.

Use your eyes and trust them. And go out and listen to the birds. Oh, if we would listen more often to the singing of the birds!

The joyful song that welcomes in the spring,
The tender mating song so bravely shy,
The song that builds the nest, the merry ring
When the long wait is ended and ye bring
The young birds out and teach them how to fly . . .

Sing of the swinging nest upon the tree,
And of your mates who call and hide away,
And of the leaves that dance, and all the glee
And rapture that begins at break of day.

They are not false witnesses, the singing birds. Their joy is not a pretence, a sham. It is part of the joy of earth, the happiness that lives eternally in Nature's heart and thrills her wild children through nearly all their days. The tiger shares it, and the mouse, and in some degree even the lowly earthworm in the mould; but all these, so far as their lives touch ours, are mute witnesses, for it is not given to us to understand their tongues.

The birds are Nature's best interpreters. From them we can learn, if we only will, what the wild world thinks of life. Although they are not our nearest kin, in many ways they are closer to us than any other of earth's living forms; for Nature, when she made the bird, made a new being unlike any other that she had ever fashioned before; a being of light and air and vital essence and melody; a sensitive, volatile, vocal being, sharing with man the gift of music and able to express, as no other could, that rapture of living

which is Nature's recompense for all that mortal flesh must endure. Perhaps it was no part of her design that this new being should become long afterward a messenger to man, a bearer of good tidings. Yet it has happened so; for if we will go out and listen to the singing birds, we shall find that in a true sense we understand their tongue and that the song which they sing is Joy.

THE END

